

# **PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI**



## **PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES**

### **DAILY HANSARD**

**MONDAY, 14TH JULY, 2025**

**[CORRECTED COPY]**

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**MONDAY, 14TH JULY, 2025**

The Parliament met at 10.33 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

**PRESENT**

All Members were present, except the honourable Minister for Youth and Sports, honourable K.V. Ravu, honourable P.D. Kumar, honourable S. Kumar and honourable S. Nand.

**ADMINISTRATION OF OATH/AFFIRMATION OF ALLEGIANCE**

Honourable Inosi Kuridrani subscribed to the Administration of Oath/Affirmation of Allegiance and took his seat in Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Our very warm congratulations to you, honourable Member, on your appointment. Welcome to Parliament and I extend my best wishes for a successful and fulfilling tenure for the remainder of this Parliamentary term.

For the information of all honourable Members, honourable Inosi Kuridrani is scheduled to deliver his maiden speech on Wednesday morning, 16<sup>th</sup> July, 2025.

**MINUTES**

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Friday, 27<sup>th</sup> June, 2025, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

**COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER**

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting. I hope you have rested well and come fully prepared to respond meaningfully to the Budget Address delivered two weeks ago by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Professor Biman Prasad.

I also welcome those joining us in the gallery and those watching the live proceedings on television and the internet. Thank you for your interest in this week's National Budget debate.

I recognise in the gallery and welcome warmly the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China, His Excellency Ambassador Zhou Jian and Director Jason. Fiji cherishes its long-standing diplomatic ties with China and we look forward to continued collaboration in the spirit of mutual respect and prosperity. Thank you Your Excellency for joining us today.

### Back to Office Reports

For the information of all honourable Members, the following Back to Office Reports are now available in the library for perusal and for your reference, the:

- (1) 67<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference, which was held in Sydney, Australia;
- (2) official visit to the Parliament of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia; and
- (3) official study visit to China which covered Shanghai, Shaanxi and Beijing.

For your information, I also attended with the Executive the Presiding Officers and Clerks Conference (POCC) that was held in Nauru last week. A very successful one at that, and the Back to Office Report will be filed in due course.

### Written Response

For the further information of honourable Members, the Secretariat has received the written response from the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Civil Service, Public Enterprises and Information to Written Question No. 48 of 2025, asked by honourable Premila Kumar. The response has been conveyed to the honourable Member and a copy uploaded to the Parliament's website.

### Reminder - Non-Attendance During Parliament Sitting

Finally, this is a general reminder to all honourable Members, to inform the Speaker's Office in advance should you be unable to attend any sitting of the House. Such notice allows for appropriate recording and is a matter of Parliamentary courtesy and response to the other Members and to the proceedings. Your cooperation in this regard is appreciated.

## **FIIJ NATIONAL PROVIDENT FUND (AMENDMENT) BILL 2025**

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the -

- (1) Fiji National Provident Fund (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Bill No. 26/2025), be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (2) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (3) Bill must not be referred to a Standing Committee or other Committee of Parliament;
- (4) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Friday, 18<sup>th</sup> July, 2025, but that one hour be given to debate the Bill with the right of reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

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

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be very brief, and I am sure when the Bill is debated, the honourable Members will have time to make their contributions. Essentially, the amendment aims to improve the Fund's rules to better serve our changing labour market demographic shifts, and the needs of our people, especially older workers and our diaspora community.

The core of this proposal is to revise the membership rules of the Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF). It will enable individuals who have withdrawn their funds upon reaching 55, those who have migrated and later returned to Fiji and members who have withdrawn on medical grounds to re-join the

Fund two times. That flexibility will allow them to continue building lifelong savings.

Currently, Mr. Speaker, Sir, members who fully withdrew from the Fund can only re-enter once. This was established when the retirement age was set at 55 and the likelihood of finding work after retirement was low. The rationale for this change is clear. Historical data shows that many members withdraw their funds at age 55 for a number of reasons – to pay their debts, start a business, et cetera.

Many workers, especially those with technical skills, remain active in the workforce beyond age 55. The current retirement age of 55 is lower than international standards, which we changed to 60. In most countries, it ranges from 60 years to even 70 years. Just to give a quick example: a member who joined the Fund at 22 years, worked a full life, and on reaching 55, opted to fully withdraw their funds for a number of reasons. He or she continued working and chose to re-enter the Fund on the first occasion and worked until the age of 60 years.

After again fully withdrawing their funds, a couple of years later he or she may have an opportunity to re-enter employment and would like to rejoin the Fund a second time. This would now be allowable, Mr. Speaker, Sir, under this change. That is the main rationale for this amendment, and it is in line with the Budget announcements regarding support for our people – ensuring they are able to secure income and funding in their retirement and beyond.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now open the floor for debate on the motion. At the end of the debate, we will have the right of reply from the honourable Minister.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister for his explanation of this particular Bill. He has outlined the reasons for the Bill and why it is needed. From our point of view, we have a few weeks before the next sitting of Parliament. As we have seen when other Bills presented to this House and when they go to Committee, there are a lot of issues that are brought up that show the mistakes in the Bill.

In this particular case, it is a fairly simple amendment. But I think ideally there is an opportunity for us here - even under Section 51 - if it was referred quickly to Committee, to do their own review and talking to Members so it could have come back in the next sitting of Parliament. While this is a fairly simple change, there are things that when you discuss in Committee and meet members of the public, other issues that come up that might help us discuss this Bill in a much better way.

It is only on those grounds, Sir, that I say we object to it being brought up in this particular way. We do have time; it could have gone quickly to Committee, do some review, and then be brought back.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to say to the honourable Usamate that he has admitted it is a very simple change; a change that will allow members to join the FNPF for the second time. That is the simple change that we are proposing. I do not see any problem with getting through this under Standing Order 51.

Question put.

MR. SPEAKER.- There being opposition, Parliament will vote.

Votes cast:

Ayes	-	35
Noes	-	11
Abstain	-	1

Motion agreed to.

### DEBATE ON THE 2025-2026 APPROPRIATION BILL 2025

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, I move:

That a Bill for an Act to appropriate a sum of Four Billion, Two Hundred and Fifty Three Million, Thirty Thousand, Five Hundred and Sixty Two Dollars for the ordinary services of Government for the year ending 31st July, 2026, be read a second time.

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

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, as convention has it, I know the honourable Leader of the Opposition is ready to go. I do not want to steal his thunder in anyway, so I look forward to his contribution.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate. We will first hear the response from the Shadow Minister for Finance, after which we will continue with the order of speakers as listed on the Batting Order. May I kindly remind that the response by the Shadow Minister will be limited to one hour and fifty minutes, the length of the Budget Address, and if necessary the first bell will be rung after one hour and forty eight minutes and the final bell will be rung at the expiry of time.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of the House and members of the public in the gallery and those tuning in virtually; *ni sa bula vinaka saka* and a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to, first of all, offer my congratulations to you and the people of Lau for the installation of the paramount chief of Lau, *Turaga Bale na Tui Nayau, Tui Lau, Sau ni Vanua ko Lau*, last week. The ceremony last week was a historical reclamation of identity, an act of cultural revival, and which brought to bear the sacred relationships of the *vanua* and the various chief households within our beloved Fiji. I wish the very best, of course, to the *Turaga Bale na Tui Nayau, Tui Lai, Sau ni Vanua ko Lau*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the issue at hand, I take this opportunity to thank the honourable Minister for Finance for his Budget Address. I also thank the senior civil servants and indeed, all who have contributed during the budget consultations, for their efforts and input into the budget. Putting together a National Budget is not easy, and I would like to acknowledge the efforts of all those involved in the budget process for their commitment and perseverance.

Fiji's economic and political landscape is characterised by a history of political instability, alongside efforts to build a diversified, regionally and internationally competitive economy. We currently face challenges related to political tensions, skills shortage and the need for a business-friendly environment. While we cannot change the past, we still have the opportunity to influence the future better. Therefore, our challenge as members of this House is to work together to strengthen our democracy and promote unity, and inclusivity among our diverse population. That is the path to improving our economy.

As I have stated previously on a few occasions in this Parliament, Mr Speaker, Sir, adversarial politics should be a thing of the past. It is time that we focus on the common good and issues of national importance. The budget premised on the theme, "*Building security, stability and prosperity*" is well intended and rightfully so, because it is the role of all governments to protect its citizens, businesses and the communities they serve.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our National Budget is government's financial plan, which serves as a blueprint for government's financial activities, reflecting its priorities, policies and economic goals in the medium to long term. Essentially, it is a roadmap for how government intends to raise and spend money to achieve its objectives.

In this light, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I feel it would have been fitting if national budgets include some indications of the actual revenue derived and the level of expenditure utilised in the past financial years, measured against the budget for that particular year. That should be a good indicator of how prudent and efficient government has been, in executing its plans. This should be food for thought in the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with concept of the Opposition being a vital part of our political system, I see my role and the role of the Opposition is to keep government in check; to give credit where it is due and criticise where necessary. I intend to do just that in this response to the honourable Minister for Finance's Budget Address, but before doing so, I took time to dig back into the honourable Minister for Finance's previous inputs in budget debates as a member of the Opposition, and most recently, his two previous budget speeches of 2023 and 2024 respectively. I was not too surprised with what I saw.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one thing that became glaringly obvious in all this, the consistency in the honourable Minister's inconsistency. The rhetoric does not match the action. This does not reflect well on the 2025-2026 Budget that he had just presented on Friday, 27<sup>th</sup> June, 2025 in this Parliament. Some initial reactions, I begin by making reference to the honourable Minister's first Budget Address in 2023. He stated that as the Minister for Finance, people expected him to talk economics, but everything is connected to everything else. Bearing in mind the connections for the 2025-2026 Budget Address, again using one of his favourite lines, more politics, less economics, or maybe good politics, but bad economics.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in his attempt to justify the reasons behind the 2025-2026 National Budget allocations, the honourable Minister for Finance makes frequent remarks about the budget framed in an extraordinary global environment, extraordinary circumstances, and major global headwinds ahead. But guess what is ahead? Not so much the global headwinds, but a local storm, the 2026 General Elections. That is the honourable Minister's biggest worry, and of Government too. That is the fact of the matter. This is a panic budget. It is bad for economic certainty and continuity.

Another point, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government has decided to abandon its intention to remain on a path of fiscal consolidation. But why? Let me quote the honourable Minister's statement in last year's National Budget Address, in which he stated the following:

"I am pleased to announce that our debt-to-GDP ratio is estimated to be around 78 percent at the end of July 2024 – a substantial reduction from the 90 percent that we inherited. This substantial reduction in the debt-to-GDP ratio has been welcomed by the multilateral institutions, credit rating agencies, and development partners. We are in a safer zone now, but we need to stay on course for at least a decade to bring down the debt-to-GDP ratio to below 60 percent. This focus is more important than politics."

Very well said, honourable Minister, but it is only a year and you have deviated from that commitment.

There is another important issue, the issue on wastage. In his 2021-2022 Budget response, the honourable Member questioned the Government on how much we are losing annually through wastage, pilferage, and inflated project costs and mismanagement. I want to raise the same question to the honourable Minister this morning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, he is throwing public money all over the place again, contrary to his earlier concerns - money to the School Management Association, Fiji Trades Union Congress, Principal

Association and Head Teachers Association, additional to the ones that have been previously mentioned in last year's address – spending strategies to win votes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, if I may borrow one of his famous lines? ‘Government is spending money like drunks in a nightclub.’ In his concern about wastage in the 2016-2017 Budget Debate, the honourable Minister made this recommendation to the then Prime Minister: “I would say to the honourable Prime Minister to cut his Cabinet size to five, and save some millions of dollars to do other things. Permanent Secretaries can run the show.”

Along the same line, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is what he stated in the 2018-2019 Budget Debate; “We will be cutting ministerial salaries and allowances; we will be cutting out the international conferences and jet-setting. We will keep Ministers at home to focus on making life better for the Fijians.” Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope that the honourable Finance Minister can commit to this with the appropriate actions.

This is the honourable Minister’s third Budget Address and in all those Addresses, he has continuously blamed the previous government for the state of government finances that they are in now. This is unfortunate. He was well aware of the issues and promised in his election campaign, to make a change, yet he keeps highlighting the issues from the previous government for political point scoring.

In his first budget address in 2023, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister for Finance referred to the honourable Prime Minister’s remark in a village in Vanua Levu, as quoted in the local media in which the honourable Prime Minister thanked the previous government for the work it had done in national development. He however, referring to the honourable Prime Minister, pointed out that now, that national responsibility is with him and his government. And this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the honourable Minister for Finance’s remarks on that and I quote, “...this is the leadership that respect what our predecessors have done.”

However, in the same breath, he talks about walking into a grimly state of affairs, inheriting a dilapidated state of infrastructure, a national health system on the verge of collapse, hospitals in shocking physical condition, inherited a disaster in the water sector, issues neglected over the last few years and the unsustainable debt level. This has got to stop, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because it reeks of incompetence. As outlined clearly by the honourable Prime Minister, it is his responsibility and that of government to find solutions to our problems rather than always playing the blame game.

Also in this Address, the honourable Minister stated that “two and half years ago, our Coalition Government was new and untested. But as we head into the presentation of our third budget, we are, as a once new government, more confident now.” This, Mr. Speaker Sir, is an indication of what appears to be a lack of direction in the two previous budgets, and that only now, they are coming to their senses. The Minister and most of his colleagues in Government have been Members of Parliament for the past two previous terms, actively participating in budgetary and governance matters involving parliamentarians. During those years, we encountered many natural disasters and worse, the COVID-19 pandemic. Those were real tests, yet, they appear to not have gained from those experiences.

Again in his Address, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister rightfully stated that in any fiscal year, government must adopt a realistic approach to Government revenue. There are two parts to this - revenue versus expenditure. Most economists argue that raising revenue is not so much a major issue, but the challenge lies in the prudent management and the control of expenditures. That is the challenge for Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we go back to 2023, the Government had raised the corporate tax to 25 percent from 20 percent and increased the departure tax when they came into power. It appears like a case of



shooting the goose that lays the golden egg. Government chose to implement these measures at a time when businesses needed government's assistance the most. We were still on the recovery mode post-COVID-19 and yet we strangled our businesses. Preferably, there should not have been any major changes to the taxation policy to allow for the continuation of the recovery environment. This was important for continuity, consistency, and predictability. Worse still, Government chose to increase VAT to 15 percent from 9 percent at a time when communities needed support the most, with many people having lost their jobs and were just beginning to recover from the impact of COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now wish to move to the substance of the 2025-2026 National Budget. I recall, while contributing to the debate on the 2022-2023 Appropriation Bill, the honourable Minister for Finance stated, and I quote, "...a good, focused, relevant budget speech can be finished in an hour". He spoke for almost two hours, or perhaps instances in the past over two hours, in delivering the current budget. Typical, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

On the Budget, what we have, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is another high-spending budget. I say that again. What we have, Mr Speaker, Sir, is another high-spending budget, coming at a time when Fiji is not in any type of crisis. The proposed expenditure bill of \$4.8 billion against a projected revenue of \$3.9 billion borders on irresponsibility. Worse still, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government has presented this high-spending budget without a clearly articulated fiscal strategy and no medium-term expenditure framework. There is also no fiscal consolidation pathway to return to a balanced budget.

What is even more concerning, is that this spending surge is not targeted towards long-term economic development. The bulk of the budget is absorbed by recurrent expenditure items such as wages and normal operating costs. There is very little allocated towards productivity enhancing capital investments and if I may also ask, Mr. Speaker, Sir, where is the shift to diversify the economy to local-based agriculture and the resource sector?

On cost of living measures, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank Government for the measures they have taken in the new financial year's budget to cushion the impact of the rising cost of living on citizens and communities. One of the very positive steps in this initiative is the establishment of a joint enforcement task force to monitor prices. This is necessary because what has been evident in the past was traders utilising means within the system to bypass policies that have been implemented to support and bring relief to customers.

Another of the key developments in this area is the review of the Biosecurity Authority of Fiji's protocols to dismantle trade barriers and increase import competition for food items.

The pay increase for civil servants is welcomed so are the other cost of living matters and targeted expenditure support to citizens in future budgets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these measures are minimal and will have very minimal impacts on the purchasing powers of individuals, but they are acknowledged nevertheless. I urge Government to consider providing higher levels of support, commensurate with the rise in cost of living in the coming years.

On the budget deficit, the 2025-2026 budget marks a shift away from the consolidation strategies of the past years to now focusing on safeguarding against potential economic slowdown. This has resulted in a Budget deficit of \$886 million in the 2025-2026 Budget, up from \$639 million in the previous budget. The fiscal deficit widens significantly from last year, reversing the gains made in the past two financial years and drive Fiji deeper into an already unsustainable debt situation. Fiscal deficits under the Coalition Government have risen from 3.5 percent in 2023-2024 to 4.5 percent in 2024-2025 and now 7.5 percent in the 2025-2026 Budget. If we were to add the

Government guarantees and contingent liabilities, this is one of the honourable Minister's favourite, always adding the Government guarantees and the contingent liabilities, our budget deficit would already be in the billions.

This higher Budget deficit has certainly impacted our national debt level and can lead to increased interest rates, higher inflation and reduced economic growth. This can also decrease investor confidence, potentially leading to trade imbalances, making it difficult for Government to respond to future economic challenges. Government must find ways to increase revenue generation in order to reduce our borrowings.

On the debt levels, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the projected national debt for the next year is \$11.7 billion. In 2019, our total debt stood at \$5.7 billion equivalent to 48.4 percent of GDP. This rose to \$6.7 billion in 2020 and \$7.7 billion in 2021. This further rose to \$9.1 billion or 91.1 percent of GDP in 2022-2023 when the current administration came into power. The sharp rise in the national debt levels between 2019 to 2022 is attributed to the uncertainties brought by the natural disasters that affected Fiji during that period. This was exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19.

Interesting, Mr. Speaker, Sir, without encountering any major disastrous event during their period of tenure in office since coming into power in December 2022, they have raised the national debt level from \$9.1 billion to \$11.7 billion.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government promised to reduce debt, but what we have seen is it has increased debt by \$2.7 billion within just these three years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister is quoted in the *Fiji Times* on 28<sup>th</sup> June, 2025 as saying that "our Government did not create the unsustainable public debt that we inherited since 2022, but you raised it to the current level, honourable Minister.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- You are in control now, so deal with it!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government must be urged to find a way out sooner than later because with the current trend we are heading into the doldrums.

On debt-to-GDP, the honourable Minister's favourite, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when they came into power in 2022, the Coalition Government had promised to reduce the fiscal debt and bring down the debt-to-GDP ratio. This, unfortunately has not happened.

At the end of July 2025, this ratio is projected to reach 77.5 percent of GDP and amount to \$10.6 billion. The total debt-to-GDP ratio for this Budget is 79.8 percent and brings our total nominal debt to \$11.7 billion. The honourable Minister argues that what is more important is the debt-to-GDP ratio.

The consequences of a high debt-to-GDP ratio, Mr Speaker, Sir, can be dire. It will hinder economic growth by increasing borrowing costs for both Government and businesses, potentially leading to reduced investments and productivity, and increases the risk of financial instability, including potential sovereign debt crisis. The current levels of debt-to-GDP (ratio) may also lead to the Government crowding out private investment, by absorbing available capital and driving up interest rates, reducing resources available for businesses to expand and innovate.

On the OPEX to CAPEX ratio, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the operating to capital expenditure mix of 81 to 19 percent in the current budget is high, which points directly to a case of unsustainable budgeting. This indicates a reliance on immediate needs over long-term investments, which will hinder future growth and sustainability.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Insufficient injection into capital works, Mr. Speaker, Sir, means a lack of investment into critical infrastructure, which are crucial for economic growth and improving standards of living. High operating expenditure often leads to a reliance on current revenue and third-party support to cover ongoing expenses, leaving little room for unforeseen emergencies or strategic investments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, third-party support in the form of budget support grants hovered around \$8 million over the 1992 to 2019 period but rose to a significant \$280 million during the COVID-19 period and has since been coming down and is likely to revert to pre-pandemic levels sooner than later. Government must be mindful of this. A healthy balance between operating and capital expenditure is crucial for long-term sustainability and value creation.

On revenue driven by expenditure. Mr. Speaker, Sir, sound public financial management dictates that revenue should shape expenditure, and not the other way round. This has apparently been discarded in this budget in favour of political expedience. The honourable Minister spoke at length about the debt-to-GDP ratio, framing it as evidence of fiscal control. This is misleading, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This Government came into power promising to reduce our debt-to-GDP ratio. They promised restraint, yet they are going on a spending spree with this budget.

I wish to talk about economic recovery, Mr. Speaker, Sir. According to the Macroeconomic Committee, a total of nine sectors, key to economic growth, still have not recovered to their pre-pandemic levels. These include construction, mining, manufacturing, arts and entertainment, and accommodation, amongst others, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Most of these nine sectors were affected by the 3 percent increase in concession rates under the Concession Codes 236, 231, 235 and 1,173, respectively, in the 2023-2024 Budget, the first budget by the Coalition Government. This is an alarming signal, as these are not fringe industries, but are foundational to our economy, yet this Budget offers no comprehensive strategy to target their recovery; no tailored stimulus package, no incentive frameworks, no direct capital injections. Sad, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very sad.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- While tourism continues to drive headline growth, we are seeing uneven economic growth with key sectors still in recession. This is unsustainable and we are wondering why our budget deficit continues to grow. Government must act on these issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FNP interest, the record 8.75 percent interest payout is a significant achievement for the Fiji National Provident Fund and for that we ought to recognise the efforts of the board and the management of the Fund, and indeed all staff for their diligence and prudence in the management of the Fund. But that was not just an achievement, it was proof that bold reform and responsible leadership produce results. You will recall, Sir, that in 2006 the Fund was in dire straits, and by 2011, it was in deep financial trouble.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in an effort to save the Fund, the past government urgently took necessary steps to rectify the situation with the guidance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and oversight from the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF). One key step was the passing of the 2011 FNP Act, which laid the

foundation for better governance and growth - the benefits of which are reaped by members today.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- So there we are, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It would be wise of the Government to learn a thing or two from the reform of the FNPF to stabilise the financial situation the Government is currently in.

On fiscal, economic and external risks, Mr. Speaker, Sir - our fiscal space is alarmingly narrow. With a high budget deficit, there is no clear provision or contingency measure for natural disasters - a glaring omission for a country as vulnerable as Fiji.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- It is concerning that Government has laid out its revenue projections while reducing VAT and maintaining the existing list of zero-rated items. There is a significant risk, therefore, that the revenue target may not be met. This raises the question of the reliability of the revenue forecast underpinning this budget.

Externally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we face challenges in the global environment. Rising interest rates, volatile fuel prices, and geopolitical instability all threaten to undermine our economic progress. Adding to these uncertainties is the lack of clarity on tariff arrangements with some of our major trading partners.

At the sectoral level, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Reserve Bank of Fiji has signalled a slowdown in tourism, one of our economic pillars. Disappointingly, the Budget does not present a clear strategy to diversify our economy to build resilience against economic shocks. These risks are interlinked and real. They demand urgent attention, comprehensive and transparent policy responses, which I find lacking in this Budget.

Investment levels, Mr. Speaker, Sir - Fiji's investment landscape could be better. Currently, many investors face challenges related to high costs. As a result, businesses are taking a cautious approach to investing in the medium term. Government must ensure an investor-friendly environment and streamlined processes to address investor concerns.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, investment is crucial for developing countries as it fuels economic growth, creates jobs, and improves critical infrastructure, which are important for the people and vital for economic progress.

On critical national issues, first, on poverty. According to the last Household Income and Expenditures Survey (HIES), 29.9 percent of Fiji's population lives below the poverty line. One of the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations is to eradicate extreme poverty by 2030.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the question we should now ask ourselves now as a government and as a nation – is: what are we doing about this? It is not an easy task, but one that must be addressed. Poverty reduction requires a multifaceted approach, that includes both immediate relief and long-term solutions. Therefore, it is important for government to place emphasis on these to accelerate the reduction of our high poverty levels. Investments in education, welfare, and healthcare are good first steps. Building partnerships with communities, non-government and civil society organisations, and the private sector can be highly effective in tackling poverty.

On drug abuse, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our drug situation is not a secret anymore. As was highlighted in the media recently, young boys were injecting themselves with what appeared to be drugs. Such is the

dire situation we are in now. In certain areas in Suva, drug is being sold openly on the roadside and individuals have become bold in dealing in drugs. The influx of hard drugs has only worsened our situation. Government's efforts to combat the use and trafficking of drugs in Fiji is commendable, but there are things we should do differently. I commend the Fiji Police Force for their awareness campaigns through social media on the negative impacts of drugs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, noting their effectiveness, the Government should consider strengthening educational and awareness frameworks at all levels of the community to educate citizens on the impacts of drug use. An added concern is the rise in HIV as an offshoot of drug use. In the first half of 2024 alone, the number of new cases of HIV – according to the Substance Abuse Council was 500, compared to a total of 415 for 2023. These are alarming developments, which require our urgent attention.

Eradication of corruption, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the increase in funds allocated for the fight against corruption. The battle will continue to be an uphill one, with methods employed to gain from corrupt practices becoming sophisticated. The trend of endemic corruption in Fiji is alarming and one that will require innovation, knowledge and skills to be able address them. A continuous upgrading of skills through training and retraining of personnel charged with tackling corruption, both at the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption and the Fiji Police Force, is extremely necessary if they were to be effective and successful in their efforts. If anything, Fiji's position on stepping out corruption should be strengthened so that corruption at all levels is discouraged.

The issue of labour shortage, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fijians continue to leave our shores in search of better opportunities for employment overseas. In 2018, an average of 9,000 people were leaving for overseas. In 2019, over 25,000 emigrated, either temporarily or permanently. Between 2022 and 2023, over 40,000 left, equivalent to a net migration of 5 percent. Mr. Speaker, Sir, skilled professionals are departing permanently, especially in the key sectors, education and health sectors, creating skills shortage in these areas domestically. The exodus of workers has strained Fiji's workforce. With the shrinking working-age population, Fiji faces challenges in sustaining economic growth. This is a major challenge for Government, for which a solution needs to be found in earnest.

As recent as last week, a newspaper article highlighted the case of teacher shortage in a secondary school in Vanua Levu. This is the reality, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The problem we have due to labour shortage is chronic. Other areas such as health, tourism, and the primary industries are also affected. The Government needs to be strategic in the allocation of resources to education, to ensure that funds are allocated to areas where skills are needed the most, so that the vacuums created by the labour shortage are mitigated in a timely fashion.

Climate change, I would have hoped for climate change to have been given more prominence in the 2025-2026 Budget. The issue of the impact of climate change on small island nations like Fiji, it has been the matter of discussions at international forums for many years. Fiji, like many island nations, faces severe impacts from climate change, including rising sea levels, coastal erosion, more frequent and intense cyclones, and increased flooding.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these changes threaten infrastructure, agriculture, and the livelihoods of Fijian communities, particularly those living in coastal areas. In the last two years, a total of fifty villages were identified to be relocated as a result of the impact of climate change. Of these, six villages have been relocated according to a *FijiVillage* news article on 21<sup>st</sup> April, 2024, the Fiji Human Rights Commission had identified an additional 19 villages that need to be relocated. This portrays the enormity of the challenge that we have due to the impact of climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government must act decisively now and allocate the necessary resources to ensure the security and safety of areas and communities in Fiji already negatively affected by climate

change are addressed. On the same token, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our intention to shift from fossil fuel to clean energy must be strongly supported.

We have a high fuel bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and investments in clean energy initiatives should be encouraged, and Government is expected to provide some initiatives too in this sector to attract major investments. Fiji, as a past COP president should lead the charge in climate smart and environmentally friendly investments and initiatives as part of its commitment to reduce global warming and leave behind a better world for our children in the future.

Rural Housing, Government has been allocating funds for rural housing aimed to assist our rural communities. It is a concern that this allocation has been reduced from \$3.2 million this year to \$2.9 million in the 2025-2026 Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Housing as a basic need is important for our rural communities.

We have learned from the past, Mr Speaker, Sir, this is a necessity and is a significant investment as it provides a sense of security to individuals and rural communities. More importantly, it could be a measure that could help arrest the temptation for rural dwellers to move to urban areas. Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, rural housing designs are tailored to reduce the disaster risk by promoting resilient housing in vulnerable communities. In support of our rural communities, this allocation must be maintained or increased to cater for their needs.

Help for those in need - Government should be looking at providing greater help to those who need it most, such as the underprivileged and the poor amongst us. There is already support available, such as welfare assistance, education support, et cetera. We believe more can be done. Yes, I know there are trade-offs. Extending more health and other social benefits come with a cost.

Currently, there are costs of services that are applied equally across the board to all citizens, regardless of their earnings. I am of the view, for example, that those in the higher income brackets could pay for health services, and a little more in water rates. These revenue sources could be channelled to help those amongst us that are in need of greater support.

Opportunities for Growth - allow me to raise a few areas, apart from tourism, which I believe that real opportunities for growth lie. First, the agriculture sector. Allow me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture to acknowledge the contributions of the late Minister for Agriculture and Waterways, Vatimi Rayalu, whose dedication and commitment has elevated the Ministry of Agriculture to where it is today. He is sorely missed.

Fiji's agriculture sector, Mr. Speaker, Sir, presents numerous opportunities for growth and investment. The sector is already a significant contributor to our national economy; as at 2024, contributing 6.2 percent of GDP with a total value of \$843 million. These figures reveal that agriculture remains one of the backbones of our economy providing employment and livelihoods, while also offering potential for expansion and diversification.

It is rather unfortunate, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that with so much potential we continue to import agricultural produce that we should be producing locally. In 2022 alone, our agricultural imports reached \$507.8 million with total imports of crop and livestock (including value-added commodities) exceeding \$1 billion. This is unfortunate and unsustainable.

The real areas for growth lie in the agro-processing – adding value to raw agricultural products through processing, packaging, and branding. The growing tourism sector creates a strong domestic market for fruits and vegetables including, meat and meat products. Our challenge is to increase local production to meet demands, both in volume and quality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the hindrances to growth in this sector is inadequate infrastructure, particularly in transportation and storage, which can lead to increase costs and limit market access. Government must address this.

Investment in research is important to promote innovation and technology transfer to support farmers and enhance the agricultural sector.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to support farmers in the non-sugar agricultural sector (dalo, ginger, cassava, and vegetable farmers) fertilizer and weedicide subsidies must be increased substantially. We acknowledge the \$1 million allocation given in the Budget, but there is a huge difference between the fertilizer and weedicide subsidy to non-sugar farmers when compared to the same with the cane farmers. This is so important to reduce input costs and improve the quality of locally-produced products, let alone the higher economic return to our farmers.

In relation to sugar, the industry continues to face numerous challenges including declining production, climate change impacts, labour shortage, aging farmers and issues related to land leases and farmers livelihoods. These factors are contributing to a broader crisis in the industry, impacting the Fiji economy and the livelihoods of over 200,000 Fijians who depend on the industry. These issues must be addressed, and key policy decisions must be made to decide the future of the industry.

Forestry and Fisheries, the sector has a GDP share of 2.2 percent valued at \$300 million. The sector presents significant economic opportunities particularly in sustainable resource management, value-addition and community development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, focus must be placed on developing and marketing non-timber forest products and value-added timber products to generate higher returns for resource owners, businesses and indeed for Government.

In the area of fisheries, opportunities should be explored to process and add value to fish and other marine products to increase export potential.

Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, investment in infrastructure like jetties, cold storages and multi species hatchery in the geographic divisions are critical to support growth in this sector.

Additionally, providing training and resources to communities involved in forestry and fisheries activities will enhance their capacity to manage resources sustainably and in value-added activities. Talking about resources given to communities, we need to find the best technology for cold storage or freezers given to our fishing communities because most are non-operational again after a short period of time.

Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO), Knowledge Processing Outsourcing (KPO) and Information Communication Technologies (ICT) are becoming increasingly important for economic diversification and growth, creating jobs and attracting foreign investment to Fiji. These sectors will become key drivers for economic development in Fiji, moving into the future. Several countries already rely on these sectors to drive economic growth. These include India, Philippines and Eastern Europe, with emerging markets in Africa and Latin America.

Fiji has a competitive edge in this area, with its ability to offer a combination of cost-effectiveness, a skilled workforce and a cultural and language proficiency, making it a strong competitor in the global outsourcing market. Fiji, I am aware, is adapting to the evolving needs of the global outsourcing market by incorporating new technologies and focussing on higher-value services like artificial intelligence. As of today, the outsourcing industry contributes approximately \$220 million per annum to Fiji's economy.

Mr. Speaker Sir, Government must continue to support this sector through a conducive business environment and technological advancement, and improved infrastructure to leverage our many natural advantages to continue to make Fiji the ideal choice for outsourcing service delivery.

Medical tourism, neurosurgery, cardiology, urology and more, alongside general surgery, are specialist healthcare services that were only available overseas and which are now available locally. Such is the development in our healthcare services, which must now be exploited to attract medical tourism by offering specialist healthcare services at competitive prices.

Mr. Speaker Sir, our aim should be to provide high-quality medical care at reduced costs compared to developed countries, particularly targeting patients from around the Pacific region, including New Zealand and Australia. While Government is actively promoting medical tourism as part of its strategy to diversify the economy through the provision of incentives for private healthcare investors, including tax breaks and duty-free concessions on medical equipment, much still need to be done to improve healthcare infrastructure to support both local needs and medical tourism.

State-Owned Enterprises (SOE) Reforms – Mr. Speaker Sir, there is huge potential in the state-owned enterprises, which continue to lie dormant due to lack of innovation and mismanagement. There is an urgent need for reforms in these areas. It would be good to note, that all the SOEs that were reformed by the previous Government are performing and supporting domestic growth.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Let me name a few, Mr. Speaker, Sir - Fiji Airways, Airports Fiji Limited, Fiji Ports Corporation Limited, Fiji Pine Limited and Energy Fiji Limited.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it must be noted, that all of our 12 SOEs have about the same equity and asset value as the Fiji National Provident Fund, which is about \$11 billion, if I am correct. Yet, it is only those that have been reformed that are performing.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I urge the Government to seriously consider reforming our SOEs as a matter of urgency, to enhance their performance and efficiency. Considering the importance of the SOEs in driving economic growth, it would be prudent if Government can consider assigning a dedicated minister for state-owned enterprises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will conclude because I wanted to have this within an hour, learning from the honourable Minister for Finance. A good part of the Budget Address was Government praising itself for their achievements since coming into office. I also wish to acknowledge them for such achievements, Mr. Speaker, Sir. But we need to be reminded that budgets are not a popularity contest.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- They are not tools for political gain.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- They are about laying the foundation for economic growth, strengthening democracy, and safeguarding the interests of citizens. Sadly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget lacks clarity in these areas.



HON. J. USAMATE.- No clarity at all.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- There is a mismatch in the Address against the actions in the Budget. The absence of reform measures to lift efficiency and productivity is glaring. Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Budget deficit is heading south. It is concerning how the deficit has been derived, because much of it is allocated to operating expenses that leads to unsustainability.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- The budget is weak on sustainability. We cannot focus only on allocation only and the assistances provided therein. Let us not be distracted by the short-term candy gains but be forward-looking as responsible leaders, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Sustainability was defined way back in the 1980s by the United Nations as “meeting the needs of today without compromising the future”. That is sustainability, Mr. Speaker, Sir - meeting the needs of today without compromising the future.

The critical question therefore we need to ask ourselves is whether the 2025-2026 Budget Address has long-term sustainability strategies and policies, although the short-term measures are welcomed. The people of Fiji deserve better. They deserve sound, transparent, and forward-looking economic governance.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not wish for any government to be remembered for leaving behind a bad legacy, one that is defined by soaring debts and squandered opportunities.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- With the current trend in our budgeting, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we may be sacrificing the future of our children and the next generations for the comfort of the current generation.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- It is on these grounds, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that I am not able to support the Budget.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition and Shadow Minister for Finance for his response.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for his contribution in opposition to the Budget Address given by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; *ni sa bula vinaka*. I congratulate the chiefs of Lau on the successful installation of their chief - *Na Gone Turaga Bale Tui Nayau, Tui Lau, Sau ni Vanua ko Lau* – Ratu Tevita Uluilakeba Mara.

His Excellency the President and the Government were also honoured to have hosted the state visit of their majesties, the *Tui Tonga* - King George Tupou VI and Queen Nanasipau'u - and I thank all Government and *vanua* agencies for the proper protocol accorded to them. We were also honoured to receive the Maori Queen, *Te Arikiniu Kuini* Nga wai hono i te Po Paki, who was also invited to attend the installation of the *Na Gone Turaga Bale Na Tui Nayau*.

The Government is also pleased to have witnessed the successful and unobstructed installation of the *Gone Turaga Bale na Vunivalu na Tui Kaba* and also congratulate the chief and the people of *Bau* and *Kubuna* for the solemn occasion. I wish the *Gone Turaga Bale na Vunivalu na Tui Kaba* a speedy recovery from his current illness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the national situation is, Fiji is at war. I arise today to not merely contribute to the Budget debate but to declare war on Fiji number one enemy. My contribution is presented in the form of a set of operational orders. An ordered group comprising of this Parliament, the permanent secretaries, arms of public service and our people. This is a call to war against the persistent factors that have plagued our country for too long! I refer to the clutches of stagnation, poor work ethics, lethargy, underemployment and underutilised potential!

The Budget Address by the Honourable Minister for Finance supports 2025- 2026 phase of our mission given to us by our National Development Plan 2025-2029 and titled, "*VISION 2050: Empowering the People of Fiji Through Unity* to reclaim our beloved Fiji. This is our mission.

The enemy wears many uniforms –low GDP, a lack of industry and innovation, under-prepared workforce, declining morale and unequal opportunities. These are features of our enemy, which is poverty. We inherited an economy marked by debt distress, weakened institutions and disempowered public service, further undermined by a pervasive lack of personal integrity and unethical practices in civil service characterised by inefficiency and a culture of extravagance, resistant to accountability and reform.

The cost of poor leadership, politicised procurement, an over-centralisation of power, has not only deepened inequality, it has robbed our people of creativity and trust. The enemy is poverty, and it is not abstract. It threatens livelihood, dignity and sovereignty.

Metaphorically, it is the mission of the Coalition Government led by me, as your Prime Minister, to reduce poverty, lift our economic growth, inject industry, entrepreneurship and innovation, both workforce morale and improve opportunities for our citizens, particularly to those segments of our society deserving evidence-based development imperative interventions.

As your Prime Minister, I say to the enemy, your days are numbered. The economic ground is undulating. Opportunities are unequal. The systems cumbersome. New legislations are needed, or some need to be either validated or repealed and that starts from the parent law.

Indigenous Fijians or *iTaukei* have been labelled resource rich but poor. We, the indigenous people, must refuse to accept that label. The indigenous people of Fiji receive:

- \$100 million annually from iTLTB on lease and royalties.
- \$1.07 billion from remittances which is 80 percent of the total remittances of \$1.34 billion received.
- An estimated \$350 million from wages and salaries.
- The *iTaukei* per Capita Resources and Landuse Income Survey Result given to me by TLTB on 9<sup>th</sup> of this month puts the figure at \$6,368.10 (including remittances received), or

\$4,562.23 (excluding remittances) and \$4,394.79 when Core Income Streams Only are considered.

- Across all scenarios, the estimated GDP per capita of the *iTaukei* population exceed the national property poverty threshold of \$2,190 per annum (approximately \$6 per day). We utilised these incomes in the following general ways:
  - \$1.22 billion or 80 percent in supermarkets, rent, utilities and transport;
  - \$228 million or 15 percent on building, renovations or purchasing our own homes;
  - but only \$72 million or 5 percent on savings and investments.

These figures and trends reflect not only the resilience of these income sources, but also the increased purchasing power of the *iTaukei* in Fiji's economy. They affirm that the *iTaukei* GDP per capita is on good standing; however, to sustain and enhance its progress and progress it must; it is imperative that strategic policies and new initiatives are implemented to further empower the *iTaukei* economy.

Focused efforts in financial industry, investment opportunity and inclusive economic development will be central when unlocking long term financial freedom and national prosperity, unity and stability at the rock base of our national call for the Pacific to be the Ocean of Peace.

I acknowledge Mr. Solomon Nata, the Chief Executive Officer of the *iTaukei* Lands Trust Board and the Fiji Indigenous Business Council for providing me with much of what I am opening with today. To conquer poverty, we can, and we must be strategic in the way we use our resources. The long-term prosperity, unity and stability must not be sacrificed for the short-term gains, as the honourable Leader of the Opposition has mentioned.

At the very outset, I acknowledge with profound gratitude, the reinforcement of our development partners, whose support is indispensable to the work we do and the path we are now taking.

I acknowledge the presence of His Excellency, the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China. It will also be remiss of me, of us all, to fail to recognise and acknowledge the great contribution to our great seafaring forefathers, who settled these islanders. The European navigators, explorers and discoverers, who founded these islands and put them on the world map. The early Polynesians, Micronesians, Europeans and Asian Chinese free traders who came and traded, bartered and settled in some areas of these islands. We thank the British Government at that time and their monarch for agreeing to accept the session of these islands at the hands of Ratu Epenisa Seru Cakobau and other ruling and reigning chiefs of that time, the session of these islands and their joint sovereignty to Her Majesty, Queen Victoria of England, United Kingdom and her other realms on the 10<sup>th</sup> October, 1874.

We acknowledge the great contribution of the colonial administrators, who came to administer the new colonial government and train our chiefs and people to succeed them. The workers who came from India between 1879 and 1916, and the unmatched contributions paid with blood, toil and tears made to the establishment of colonial economy. We acknowledge the sacrifice made by the British, American, Australian and New Zealand forces who fought alongside our own Fiji military forces in the two world wars to ensure that Fiji was never conquered.

The President of the United States sent Senator Jesse Jackson, to represent him at his 1970 independence celebrations, and while watching the parade and all the cultural displays on the day, remarked, "You Fijians walk so tall and proud; you have never been subjected to slavery."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our mission is clear – destroy poverty and replace it with prosperity; fortify Fiji with strong, educated, and ethical citizens; streamline systems of delivery, and rebuild our nation to withstand any future shocks, be it economic, environmental, or geopolitical.

Execution, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members will understand the sequence of the general outline. The Government battle group will launch multi-pronged, coordinated, and simultaneous sectoral assaults through combined Ministries and sector operations, working in unison under the National Development Plan to eliminate poverty. The new fronts will be opened through infrastructure, roads, ports, bridges, services, and markets.

The Budget gives us the firepower. Thank you, honourable Deputy Prime Minister. Our Government provides the leadership and drives the delivery, and the people of this nation have given us the mandate.

Grouping and tasks, the allocation of tasks and resources, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is critical to the mission's accomplishment. But, the Government has to first chart its path to navigate its purpose, guided by the realities facing our people, their aspirations, and the obstacles we must overcome. We are moving strategically with intention and conviction.

On Foreign Affairs, I welcome the allocation of \$51 million to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. That signals our intent for strategic investment in making Fiji's voice stronger, our reach broader, and our partnerships deeper in bilateral and multilateral fora. Our foreign service is no longer just a symbol. It is a driver of opportunities. I must see our diplomats bringing back the returns on investment that will benefit our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not diplomacy for show. This is diplomacy for the people, and I gave marching orders to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to step out of the box, open the doors, and promote our interests, and to restore that whatever regional or global decisions are made, Fiji has a seat at the table and a voice that cannot be ignored.

Civil Service, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome the funding under the Ministry of Civil Service – the engine room of Government service delivery and the front line of public trust. With an allocation of \$62.02 million, we are no longer making minor adjustments or cosmetic reforms. We are launching a full-scale transformation of how the civil service operates to raise professional standards, restore morale, work ethics, and enforce accountability.

Let me be very clear, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Prime Minister and the Minister for Civil Service, I will emphasise that every public servant must serve with honour, diligence, and discipline. The people of Fiji deserve a civil service that works and works well. From 1<sup>st</sup> August, all civil servants will receive a 3 percent pay rise, injecting over \$30 million into households across the country, to offset the rising cost of living and provide a benchmark to a new minimum wage rate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for Permanent Secretary positions, the Public Service Commission (PSC) is also strengthening the retention of competent and hard-working PSs. With the recommendation of the PSC, we have agreed that all PSs be placed on an initial four-year contract, subject to extension or on renewal based on good performance, and achievement of their KPIs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the mission is clear. A modern, capable, responsive, and resilient civil service that serves all Fijians fairly, efficiently and with pride for the long term. With every reward, must come added responsibility.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Public Enterprises has been provided a budget of \$10.3 million. This Ministry holds the line on transparency, accountability and value for money. Let me be clear, the days of underperforming State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) are over. We will take on board what the honourable Leader of Opposition has stated. From this day forward, every SOE must deliver. Therefore, every SOE will be held to strict KPIs for both service delivery and financial returns - no exceptions.

Where strategic partnerships make sense, we will pursue public-private partnerships but never at the expense of Fiji's national interest or sovereignty. Any divestment of government shares in key public enterprises will be strategically managed with the objective of strengthening societal gains and benefits to the people of Fiji. This is not about managing decline; it is about engineering a revival.

Public enterprises need to operate commercially, generate profit and channelling earnings back into sectors that matter most – health, education, infrastructure and social protection. While profit-making is important, enhancing societal welfare and gains are equally crucial for our long-term nation building and sustainable development. The mission is clear – public enterprises must serve the public good, perform commercially and drive the next chapter of Fiji's economic transformation.

Ministry of Information, no nation can win a war in darkness and Fiji is no exception. Our fight against poverty, misinformation and disengagement demands that every Fijian be fully informed. This year, the honourable Minister for Information takes on a revitalised strategic role as the frontline communicator of government action and public accountability with a budget of \$11 million. We are modernising how Government speaks to its people, not just to announce, but to connect, engage and empower. I issue this directive to the Ministry and all its partners – misinformation must be countered; facts must prevail, and the public must never be left in the dark again.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are not only looking forward, but we are also safeguarding the past. With \$1.38 million in funding, the National Archives of Fiji is undergoing long-overdue digitisation, infrastructure upgrades and workforce development to preserve the memory of our people and protect our national identity. These are duties of a confident and sovereign state to better inform our citizens, proud of their history and confident in their future, are the foundation of national resilience.

<sup>1</sup> I apologise, I have run out of time. May I table the rest of my response for the benefit of the honourable Members.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, it is the appropriate time to take our lunch break, but before we do, I forewarn honourable Members to be prepared for night sittings, not only for today but for the rest of the week. We will resume after lunch and honourable Parveen Bala will then take the floor.

Honourable Members, we will suspend proceedings for lunch and Parliament will resume in an hour's time.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.25 p.m.

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: Continuation of the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Civil Service, Public Enterprises and Information's response which was tabled and appended as Appendix 1.

The Parliament resumed at 1.30 p.m.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Members of Parliament; I begin by thanking the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics for presenting the 2025-2026 National Budget. I also extend my gratitude to Mr. Shiri Gounder and his team for formulating this document.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today, with some deep sense of duty, I wish to contribute to this critical debate. Let me begin by expressing our collective sorrow for the passing of the late honourable Vatimi Rayalu, former Minister for Agriculture and Waterways. He was a man of conviction, a straight shooter and unafraid to call out wrongdoings. He was deeply knowledgeable, forward-thinking and never one to waste time assigning blame. He was not only a colleague, but a personal friend. I extend my heartfelt sympathies to the Rayalu family.

As a Member of Parliament and President of TISI Sangam Fiji, I also offer prayers to the Sanatan Dharam Hindu community following the shocking incidents at the Shiv Mandir. Mr. Speaker, that attack inflicted emotional and spiritual pain upon thousands of devotees across the country. I echo the community's condemnation and call for a meaningful and inclusive healing process.

At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I respectfully urge the honourable Prime Minister to consider allocating emergency funds through the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs or another suitable channel for the restoration efforts at the temple and the replacement of its statues. This is not just any structure. The Shiv Mandir is a spiritual and historical landmark and that is where the Shree Sanatan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji, the largest Hindu organisation, was founded in 1958. Its origin stretching back to the 1920s, when our *Girmitiya* ancestors first built a humble *kuti* in Samabula. It has since become a hub of worship, cultural expression and national unity.

At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the Commissioner of Police and his team for the quick arrest of the suspect. Even in grief, the resilience of our people shines through, just as it did when our Flying Fijians secured a historic win against Scotland, despite their narrow loss to Australia. I wish to salute the players, coaches and the management - *vinaka vakalevu*, you made our nation proud.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also endorse the honourable Leader of the Opposition's response, but let me be absolutely clear that those who had drafted this Budget and now ask the people of Fiji to accept it must also be ready to hear constructive criticisms from the struggling citizens, whose lives remain untouched by the glossy promises printed in this document. This is not a people's budget. As being mentioned earlier by many, this is a lollipop budget - a sweetener served just in time for election year.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Hogwash!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Coming, do not worry!

It offers no long-term solutions, no bold ideas, just small handouts packaged as progress. The public's response is telling us that Fijians are no longer satisfied with lollipops. They want food on the table and they want action.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is a sugar rush - reckless in its spending, shallow in its planning and politically poisoned. It dangles cash today but sacrifices stability tomorrow. The Government is selling our children's future to buy votes today and turning the treasury into a campaign war chest.

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

HON. P.K. BALA.- I do not want to open my mouth my brother. Let me continue, please.

They say they are tackling the cost of living but families still choose between food and medicine. They claim record health funding but nurses continue to beg for basic resources. They say they care for seniors but pensioners are forced to sell their belongings to survive. This is not governance, it is gambling with Fiji's future and with people's lives. Those in power know the truth.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Hogwash!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Wages are low, prices are rising and our people are drowning. But instead of throwing lifelines, they are counting votes.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, from today, butter prices are up across the board.

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Well, you can afford it.

A 500 gramme pack has risen from \$13.49 to \$15.93; another 14 percent increase.

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. P.K. BALA.- You are happy because you are a shopkeeper.

Lamb chops are now selling at \$23.50 per kilogramme. These are not abstract figures - this is really hurting the poor of this country. They are the reality in every Fijian kitchen. I am sorry to say that every time the honourable Minister for Finance is asked for solutions, he will simply say, "we inherited these problems."

At some point, leadership must be about planning, not blaming. Real leaders plan for decades, not election cycles. The people of Fiji are tired of finger-pointing. We ask, what have you done? What have you achieved? I also remember that the honourable Deputy Prime Minister was famous for going on about removing the tax on fuel prices.

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Well, definitely you are not a Deputy Prime Minister, so you do not bother about it.

He said it loudly and with conviction; "Remove the tax!" Now, with him in the driver's seat, has he removed that tax, or was it all hot air? While butter prices rise and fuel remains high, the promises of relief have evaporated. The world is watching. The people are watching, and they are not impressed by slogans. They want action.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, even past projects have quickly been claimed, and officials happily attend the ribbon-cuttings, but governance is not *Instagram* reels. It is policy, planning, and results. Now I ask, where are the allocations for the promised municipal elections? The honourable Minister for Local Government has repeated these promises for three years, yet this budget contains nothing.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Not a cent, and the honourable Finance Minister now cites legislative changes as the barrier. There may be a game plan by hiding money somewhere and call election, because this is how you people gamble, and this could be one of the reasons money has not been allocated. There are some funds given in the budget under the Ministry for Local Government, but not to hold election and that can be with him, I know.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. P.K. BALA.- I want to laugh.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honestly, jokes aside, just this year, my good friend stood up in this Parliament when I raised this question on when there will be a municipal election. He said, “end of this year.” Am I right or wrong?

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. P.K. BALA.- No, I am asking you. I feel sorry for you anyway.

I will go on to the honourable Minister for Sports. In recent times, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister for Sports, unfortunately he is not here as well, he is doing a proposal to transfer all municipal sporting facilities to the Fiji Sports Council. With all due respect, what exactly is the honourable Minister going on about, I really do not know. However, I want to tell you the fact. Many of the grounds within the municipalities he wishes to claim under these new arrangements, were not funded by government offers, or built by the Fiji Sports Council. They were built by the poor ratepayers, and I believe that there were some mayors and councillors who gave personal loans to secure building pavilions and stadiums at their respective towns and cities. Here, we have the honourable Minister for Sports, without checking the history, wants to claim all the facilities and put under Fiji Sports Council. Instead of giving funds to the municipal councils through the Challenge Fund, they are finding the easiest way out; that is the way I see.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Councils have limited funds, and that is why during our time, we used to give Municipal Councils funds for capital projects through the Challenge Fund. I have been saying this for the last two years - to assist Municipal Councils, not take away their properties. They are doing the opposite. Please, plan things right. I ask the honourable Minister to help build the capacity instead of taking control. Let us not forget that grounds were created to benefit ratepayers - not only for sports but for ratepayers' events, carnivals and community functions. If that is taken away, their rights will be taken as well.

I just want to say a few things on sugar as honourable Pillay will be speaking on that. This is on the guaranteed sugarcane price. We have been talking to farmers. Farmers were saying that they were more secure when they knew that they would get \$85 per tonne, whether sugar is for \$20 or \$15, and they knew how to plan their work. Now, they are asking if this Government can provide a guaranteed minimum price. I am asking the Government to consider making an announcement on the guaranteed sugarcane price so that the farmers could plan, invest and build their future with confidence.

Sugar Select Committee, there was an announcement that there will be a Sugar Select Committee with the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Minister for Sugar and one from the Opposition. Is this the balancing act? Is this the bilateral we are talking about? Is this the bipartisan we are talking about? What are we talking about - I do not know. However, I can tell you one thing, with his background, he will do well in that Committee, and I want to congratulate the honourable Leader of the Opposition for joining that Committee.



Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must raise concern with the setup of this Committee. We were very happy - I remember last year, the honourable Prime Minister, in an informal sitting, discussed about the Select Committee and its composition. I thought that there will be a balancing act, at least three from this side and four from that side, but when the honourable Minister for Finance announced this Committee, I was a bit surprised.

On VAT, we have called for a 9 percent VAT to be brought back with price control, and that would have given a real relief. It was needed in 2023 - not a token 2.5 percent just before elections. Next year, I know what he will do - expect another small reduction just in time for the ballots.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Why worry?

HON. P.K. BALA.- I warn you.

Mr. Speaker. Sir, we have a pitiful 5 percent increase in welfare payments, and I was surprised to read the article from the honourable Minister for Women and Social Welfare described as “what we can do for now.” She is very happy with that. Meanwhile, the global inflation sits at 7 percent and local food prices are up by 22 percent. That is not a relief, Mr. Speaker, Sir. They are still taking our poor people down the drain and the people see through that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am not very well, so I just want to finish now. Lastly as my final message, Fiji deserves better than recycled failures. We cannot allow this Government to gamble with our economy, lie to our people and leave behind a broken nation. We have a struggling Fiji - we see you, we hear you, and we are ready to fight for you.

This Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is not a solution, but a confession, a confession that they are out of ideas, out of time and soon out of office. Let us rebuild Fiji with honesty, with purpose and with people at heart.

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

*Au va yadra 'ale 'ikoga yani vei kemuni na kaiciqu, na wekaqu - 'ako kai, lavo kai, lovava kai, o ni vakarorogo 'iko mai ena nomuni vei delaniyavu va 'uraga, vanua ni veiqaravi va 'cakacaka, kei kemuni o ni va 'rorogo iko mai ena veiyasa i vuravura cava ga o ni 'iko mai kina.*

[I pay greetings to you all my brothers, my paternal and maternal relations, tuning in from your communities, villages and workplaces and around the world.]

Mr. Speaker, Sir, firstly and rightfully, I would like to acknowledge God's grace and His continued guidance and direction. I would also like to congratulate Ra High School for winning the Under-19 Boys and Girls titles in the Fiji Secondary School Rugby League competition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this afternoon, I rise with humility and gratitude to respond to the 2025-2026 National Budget, as presented by the honourable Minister for Finance on 27th June. This Budget is a reflection of our Government's steadfast commitment to sustainable development, building resilience and driving inclusive economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the third National Budget of the Coalition Government under the leadership of the honourable Prime Minister, who has steadfastly and relentlessly driven the progress of

our nation, achieving milestones and underscoring solidarity for our people and the nation. The 2025-2026 National Budget, titled, Building Security, Stability and Prosperity, champions the intention to protect our citizens, businesses and communities with purpose and clarity. All these elements, Mr. Speaker, reinforce a strong foundation on which our nation's prosperous future shall be established. I thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and his team for a well thought-out and articulated Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the Opposition may take this opportunity to criticise the Budget as overly ambitious, the truth is that it arrives at a most critical time, one where ambition is not a luxury but a necessity. The priorities outlined in the Budget are timely, strategic and geared towards recovery and long-term sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will first begin with our budgetary allocation for Head 30 –Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways. The Ministry's budget is a forward-looking roadmap that commendably aligns with our National Development Plan and the 10-year Non-Sugar Agriculture Sector Policy to support the vital non-sugar agriculture sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to take this opportunity to honour the late Minister, Mr. Vatimi Rayalu, by carrying forward his visionary legacy and deep commitment to agriculture as the foundation of Fiji's rural life, economy and national development. The non-sugar agriculture sector is a significant pillar of economic resilience and security, amid global uncertainty, recognised by the Coalition Government as a key investment for sustainable growth.

The budgetary allocation of \$115.3 million, an increase of \$14 million, demonstrates a strong commitment to enhancing agricultural growth, and development in Fiji for the new financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, is not merely an economic choice, it is a strategic necessity. By prioritising agriculture, we are not merely cultivating crops and raising livestock, we are cultivating an unshakeable future for our country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this budget covers a series of 20 new capital programmes, specifically tailored to address the emerging needs of our agriculture community. These programmes are designed to be innovative and responsive, tackling challenges like climate change, market access and technological adoption head on.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government, through the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways, is prioritising food security and commercial agriculture by investing \$154,000 to develop home gardens and school farms across the country. These are two initiatives targeting urban, peri-urban and rural communities, aiming to improve access to nutritious food, reduce market dependency and combat nutrient deficiencies and NCDs at the district level. A budget of \$772,800 has been allocated to mass produce quality seeds and planting materials, aimed to improve agricultural productivity by supporting home gardening and commercial farming.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is working to boost export earnings by increasing production of key commodities such as kava, turmeric, taro, ginger, cocoa and coffee, and by addressing supply chain challenges to improve market access. A budget of \$4.6 million has been allocated for production of these major economic commodities.

In 2024, Fiji proudly exported 730 metric tonnes of kava, achieving an export value of \$53 million. This milestone represents the highest achievement over the past 12 years between 2013 and 2024, significantly surpassing the \$15 million threshold.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also in 2024, Fiji exported \$25.2 million worth of turmeric, making a 1.6 percent increase and the highest earnings in the last 12 years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji achieved exports of 5,540 tonnes of *dalo* in 2024 with an export value of \$41.3 million, an increase of 3.6 percent and the highest record ever in the past 12 years. To maintain this upward trajectory in *dalo* exports, we have allocated a budget of \$978,000 - a 96 percent increase to support our *dalo* farmers under the Dalo Farming Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$2.7 million has been set aside to boost rice research programme, rice farming and maintaining irrigation schemes across several areas in Fiji. The Rural Rice Programme remains active and welcomes participation from rural communities interested in rice cultivation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is investing \$1.4 million in constructing and maintaining farm roads to enhance farmers' access to essential agricultural resources like seeds, fertilizers and markets. In 2024-2025 financial year alone, the Ministry distributed six rice harvesters, 21 tractors and six diggers, and newly constructed 60.46 kilometres of farm access roads.

Mr. Speaker, the current budget emphasises exclusive agricultural growth by empowering all farmers, especially smallholders, with equitable access to resources and to support and strengthen the nation's prosperity. Sir, \$337,000 is allocated to the Women in Agriculture Programme and \$281,000 for the Youth in Agriculture Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the 2024-2025 financial year, a total of 597 individual women and 51 women's groups were assisted with planting materials, training, nursery materials, farming tools, agro-inputs and market linkages. In addition, \$4.4 million has been allocated to upgrade training facilities and quarters at the Navuso Agriculture Technical Institute and Tutu Training Centre, reinforcing efforts to equip youth with the skills necessary for a sustainable future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a sum of \$225,000 has been newly developed in the 2025-2026 fiscal year budget, designated to assist smallholder farming households aimed at alleviating poverty and empowering small-scale farmers. Additionally, \$1 million is allocated to Fertilizer and Weedicide Subsidy Programme which seeks to strengthen agricultural sustainability by enhancing access to essential resources that improve productivity, profitability and long-term resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$3 million is allocated to strengthen Fiji's food supply chain by improving market access and local capacity. Of the \$3 million, \$2.5 million is for the Commercial Agriculture Development Programme which is essential for strengthening our exporters and agro-processors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the Coalition Government's investment in the 2024-2025 fiscal year, a total of 15 exporters and agro-processors were assisted in the form of generators, evaluating machines, cooler rooms, solar equipment, cooler trucks and other essential infrastructure developments. As a result of these improvements, there has been a significant increase in agricultural export capabilities as proven by the increase in exports of fresh and frozen agricultural produce by 10.5 per cent in 2024, as compared to 2023.

Mr. Speaker, crop research plays a transformative role in uplifting farmers and enriching their communities. By developing disease-resistant and climate-adapted crop varieties, research has helped farmers increase yields, reduce losses and ensure a more stable income.

In the 2024-2025 financial year, there has been an ongoing research into seed multiplication for fruit trees, pulse trees, vegetable seeds and the multiplication of crop varieties. To strengthen agriculture's future, amid global challenges, \$7.8 million is allocated to advance crop research through innovation and

sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, extension services play a pivotal role in enhancing crop production and enhancing agricultural development. These services act as a vital bridge between scientific research and farmers, ensuring the latest innovations, techniques and sustainable practices reach the grassroot level. A sum of \$15 million is allocated to enhance the services of extension services.

Mr. Speaker, the livestock sub-sector is a cornerstone of sustainable rural development, boosting farmers' livelihoods, strengthening communities, ensuring food and financial security, and generating income and employment through nutrition, trade and cultural value.

Mr. Speaker, some of the achievements from the investment in the livestock sector are the:

- (1) establishment of the Waibogi Piggery, which has the potential to house 300 pigs and will serve as a model for farmers across the country who also wish to venture into pig farming;
- (2) provided shredder machines to livestock farmers which represents the Government's commitment in establishing more demonstration sites;
- (3) increased local mushroom production;
- (4) provided high protein livestock feed; and
- (5) supported small scale farmers in building sustainable livelihoods.

Mr. Speaker, our sustainable waterways sector plays a vital role in supporting crop extension by ensuring effective water management across agricultural lands, reducing flood risks, improving agriculture production and mitigating the impacts of climate change.

In the 2024-2025 fiscal year, the following major development projects were achieved:

- (1) Dredging work for the Ba River mouth.
- (2) Drainage and flood protection work at the three sites in the Central Division, mainly in Naivilaca, Matainoco and Sawani Villages; in the Western Division, Naviyago and Mavua Villages; and in the Northern Division, Navakaka Village.
- (3) Coastal erosion protection work undertaken in Ovea Village, Lakeba Village and Nawaisomo Village.

Mr. Speaker, to continue this important work, the Ministry has been allocated a budget of \$21.8 million to support waterways projects.

Mr. Speaker, the Land Resources and Planning Development plays an essential role in the sustainable land use and agricultural planning by offering expert guidance, shaping policy and leveraging data. In the 2024-2025 fiscal year, a total of 106 farm plans were compiled and submitted to various stakeholders for new agricultural leases, farm loans and overall farm planning for farmers.

Additionally, a new Crop and Livestock Farmers' Guide was launched, serving as an important source for treating farming as a business. In collaboration with Manaaki Whenua - Landcare Research and Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), a Pacific Soil Portal in Fiji was also established. Mr. Speaker, to continue this work, a budgetary provision of \$10 million has been allocated for the Division to build a prosperous and climate resilient sector for Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, I encourage all stakeholders in the agricultural sector to view the new budget as a transformative commitment to supporting their growth, addressing challenges and unlocking a prosperous future through the sustainable use of natural resources.

Mr. Speaker, moving on to Head of Expenditure 31 - Ministry of Fisheries, the Ministry has been allocated a budget of \$24.9 million. Fisheries is an integral part of Fiji's national culture, economy and way of life. From coastal reefs and offshore waters to inland rivers and streams, these vital resources support livelihoods and have sustained diverse communities across generations.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry will continue to comprehensively review its legislation, to ensure it remains fit for purpose and operationally robust, integrate to international legal principles, applying the precautionary approach and limited scientific data, and address emerging challenges like climate change and the growing complexity of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.

Mr. Speaker, a total of \$3.1 million has been allocated to the Offshore Fisheries Management Division. The Division is tasked with the monitoring, control and surveillance system in combating the IUU phenomenon in Fiji's offshore sector. The Division now houses a National Surveillance Centre that supports national operations, complemented to the Maritime Surveillance Centre in Lami and the Regional Surveillance Centre at the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency in Honiara, Solomon Islands.

Mr. Speaker, the increase in budgetary allocation will not only reinforce the Government's move to encourage e-system, but to allow the ease of doing business in this sector and will support the Ministry's move towards strengthening its offshore monitoring, control and surveillance capabilities.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry is grateful to be hosting this year's 9Th Tuna Trade Forum in Fiji and welcomes the allocation that is given to this event. The Forum is thematically aligned to the concept of "Pacific Tuna 2050: Resilience, Innovation, Equity and Sustainable Trade for a Prosperous Future".

Mr. Speaker, \$2.9 million has been allocated for fisheries research, resource assessment and development to strengthen and scale up its three core programmes which are the Pearl Oyster Research and Development, the Fisheries Research and Conservation and Makogai Research and Development, in alignment with the Aquaculture Development Plan and the National Fisheries Policy. This budget will support the expansion of ongoing research activities to increase production, enhance community engagement and increase economic returns.

Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to inform the House that the procurement of a fisheries research vessel, generously supported by the Japanese Government, will enhance advanced and exploratory fisheries research by enabling comprehensive stock assessment, ocean monitoring, habitat mapping and data driven management of our marine and coastal resources.

Mr. Speaker, \$2.2 million has been allocated for the Technical Services Division, to allow for the purchasing of technical equipment required for maintenance and repair works of the Ministry's facilities and equipment, including the 23 ice plants, 32 service centres and 43 institutional quarters across the four Divisions. Also included is the purchase of salt flake ice machines and a new ice machine for Vanuabalavu and Levuka.

Mr. Speaker, in terms of aquaculture development, \$5.7 million has been allocated towards expanding sustainable aquaculture by reducing effort in wild capture fishery and transitioning towards cultured marine commodities, ensuring long-term marine resource management. A sum of \$340,000 is allocated to support the Cawaro Ice Plant, \$620,000 towards the Koro Fisheries Station, \$56,250 for the initial preparatory works for Matakunea Fisheries Station.

Mr. Speaker, for inshore fishery commodity development and market connectivity, \$1.3 million has been allocated to reinforce market accessibility on various inshore fishery commodities, leading to the enhancement of diversification and commercialisation.

Mr. Speaker, moving on to Head 32, the Ministry of Forestry is allocated a budget of \$25.6 million. The forestry sector continues to play a crucial role in Fiji's socio-economic development. It is not only a driver of rural development and economic opportunity, but a constant of our environmental resilience, supporting food and water security, biodiversity and climate mitigation.

Mr. Speaker, the 2025-2026 budget continues to support our national reforestation initiative with a total of \$2.8 million allocated specifically for the reforestation of degraded forests with indigenous and other species project. This is a key investment in reversing forest degradation, restoring native biodiversity and progressing our goal to plant 30 million trees in 15 years. I am pleased to inform this august House that we have already surpassed 60 percent of this target with improved seedling survival rates and the Ministry thanks the unwavering support of our partners and communities.

Mr. Speaker, to support timber harvesting in our rural maritime communities, a total of \$2.5 million has been allocated under the Commercial Maritime Pine Subsidy Project. In partnership with Fiji Pine Limited and Tropik Wood Industries, this initiative will empower communal pine landowners in maritime regions to commercially send their certified pine logs to Drasa Sawmill. This subsidy is designed to ease the operational challenges of timber harvesting in remote maritime areas by improving transportation, logistics, enhancing market access, stimulating economic activity and promoting sustainable forest-based livelihoods.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, the Fiji Pine Trust will receive \$1.7 million to deepen engagement with landowners and build technical expertise. This support strengthens the partnership between the Ministry and the pine landowners, empowering them to actively participate in plantation management.

Mr. Speaker, a total of \$1.5 million has been allocated to the Maritime Pine Development Project with a specific focus on Kadavu and islands in the Lomaiviti and Lau Provinces. This investment would help strengthen the pine industry on these islands, supporting increased timber production and supply.

Mr. Speaker, the revenue generated from pine harvesting will directly contribute to community development, including improved access to education, health services and infrastructure. A testament to this is the Narocake Pine Scheme on Gau Island where a total of 12 families were assisted in their housing rehabilitation programme after being supplied with a total of 16.5 cubic metres of treated timber for their house construction which was worth \$23,930.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since the commencement of this project, the Ministry has supported the production of a total of 844 housing structures, representing a total investment of \$5.5 million. The Maritime Pine Development Project is making a tangible difference, strengthening the financial capacity of local households and enabling communities to take great ownership in the sustainable management of their forest resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry remains firmly committed to supporting our mahogany landowning units. An allocation of \$636,000 has been provided to support the operations of the Fiji Mahogany Trust and the broader Fiji Mahogany Development Initiative. This funding will strengthen the functioning of the 14 mahogany stations across the country and will cover capacity building programmes, including training and awareness for landowners. Additionally, it will enable the procurement of essential assets required to enhance the Trust's operation and ensure the delivery of timely and effective services to mahogany resource owners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry continues to support micro-, small and medium enterprises through the Forest Subsidy Programme since its inception in 2015. This initiative assists small-scale operators, especially in rural and remote areas, by reducing their upfront costs associated with timber harvesting, transportation and compliance. The Forest Subsidy Programme is allocated

a total of \$200,000 in this new financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another vital allocation is the \$782,600 that has been allocated to the Forestry Training Centre in Colo-i-Suva. This facility is our national hub for technical forestry training. The upgrades will enhance and modernise infrastructure, improve safety standards and integrate climate-smart and digital learning tools. This investment has been long-awaited, and it ensures that forestry personnel, students and landowners receive the highest quality training to meet the current and future forestry demands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to uphold transparency and sustainability in forest operations, \$256,800 has been allocated to the Monitoring and Surveillance Project. This funding will boost regulatory oversight and ensure compliance with sustainable harvesting standards. The funding will also support the finalisation and the implementation of the Forest Bill 2025, including associated regulations and guidelines which will further solidify our legal and institutional framework for forest resource management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is also undertaking a comprehensive review of the governing mahogany legislation. This critical reform will be a catalyst for revitalising the sector and is expected to reshape the governance structure of both, the Fiji Mahogany Trust and the Fiji Hardwood Corporation Limited.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a total of \$1.4 million has been allocated for the REDD+ project, which will support Fiji's emission reduction programme in Viti Levu, Vanua Levu and Taveuni.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry remains committed to the management and protection of forest parks and reserves, while promoting alternative livelihood opportunities for resource owners. This commitment is clearly reflected in the successful establishment of the Nadarivatu Community-Based Forest Park and the Lavena Coastal Walk within the Bouma National Heritage Park, during the current year. With a budgetary allocation of \$506,250, the Upgrade of the Forest Park Project will support the establishment of new community-based forest parks and the renovation and improved management of existing ones.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2025-2026 Budget is a progressive, well-targeted and forward-looking budget. It strengthens our ability to protect, sustainably manage and develop our natural resource-based sectors, ensuring real and lasting benefits to our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wholeheartedly commend this Budget to this august House and I reaffirm the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways, the Ministry of Fisheries and the Ministry of Forestry's dedication to delivering impactful and sustainable outcomes for all Fijians. *Vinaka vakalevu* and I thank you for the opportunity to speak.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please, observe the time. I have only given concession to her being heard because she had been given extra portfolio in the last few weeks. So, to the other honourable Members, please, observe your time limits.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; good afternoon, *namaste* and *ni sa bula*.

I rise to make my contribution to the 2025-2026 Budget presented to Parliament by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics on 27th June, 2025.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I begin my reply to the 2025-2026 Budget Address by strongly criticising and expressing my deep concern at the damage done to the Samabula Shiv Mandir in Suva last week. It is very sad to see actions of this nature by some irresponsible people. I very strongly condemn this cowardly act and hope that the perpetrators are brought to justice at the earliest.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition on his words of wisdom, which I truly support and wholeheartedly endorse - the sentiments offered to promote economic growth and manage the affairs of the State prudently.

I acknowledge the continuation of free education, bus fare subsidy and the reduction of VAT from 15 percent to 12.5 percent, as positive steps that will bring some relief to struggling families. These are important, and I give credit where it is due.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a member of the Opposition and a representative of my people, I intend to highlight some of the issues related to the policy measures announced in this august House on 27th June, 2025.

The primary objective of the Government budget is to create a comprehensive financial plan that supports economic growth and the wellbeing of all its citizens, while ensuring efficient and transparent use of public funds. It is rather unfortunate that the Coalition Government's 2025-2026 Budget offers very little innovative measures to address high cost of living for ordinary Fijians, who are being pushed into poverty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since the Budget announcement, I have been engaged with countless Fijians from all walks of life, including farmers, teachers, market vendors, factory workers, taxi drivers, senior citizens, residents from my area and residents from our most rural and remote areas, including our outer islands. The overwhelming sentiment, Sir, is one of deep disappointment and profound concern, particularly regarding food costs. They universally echo the sentiment that this Budget lacks vision, proper planning and, tragically, they fear it will inflict further hardship on our children in the years to come.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 15 percent VAT imposed in 2023 has done a lot of damage in the last two years and had great impacts on Fijians' livelihood. The Coalition Government's decision to initially raise VAT to 15 percent in its first Budget was not well thought out. It triggered a cost of living crisis. To reduce VAT now to 12.5 percent is to please the Fijians, but it is not so easy to convince them because they have suffered badly in the last two and a half years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 2.5 percent reduction in VAT fails to mitigate the cost of living disaster caused by the honourable Minister's first two Budgets. It does nothing to tackle the long-term challenges such as poverty, which is almost the same unimaginative policy that will deny Fijians meaningful progress and prosperity. Sir, 6 percent reduction and bringing it back to what it was in 2022 would have brought some relief but, unfortunately, Government has blatantly disregarded this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government's decision to increase VAT in 2023 was a poorly calculated move, which directly affected the bread and butter issues of Fijians and making it difficult to make ends meet.

Many Fijians, are now literally living from hand to mouth. This desperate situation has eroded public trust and compelled many of our brightest and most productive citizens to seek greener pastures abroad, or to embrace the temporary worker schemes in Australia and New Zealand as their only viable option.



Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the Coalition Government realised that election is looming and people are losing trust in the Coalition Government, they decided to reduce VAT by 2.5 percent. Little have the Coalition Government realised the pain and suffering that Fijians have gone through since the 15 percent VAT was introduced. It had and is still having a devastating effect on the poorest of the poor in our community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fijians are now forced to dig deeper into their pockets simply to survive. Many have the desire to buy essentials, but lack the ability to do so. It took the Coalition Government two and a half years to realise and reduce VAT by 2.5 percent.

Fijians recognise this Budget for what it is - a 2026 election countdown budget designed to offer temporary relief. Fijians also know that this Government will consider further VAT reduction in the next budget as we come closer to election.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for a government that came to power promising fiscal responsibility, this Budget offers no credible plan to reduce debt or curb wastage. The Coalition partner's election promise was to reduce debt. Instead, they are ballooning it and if this pattern of borrowing continues, we could see another massive deficit in the 2026-2027 budget.

There is no serious plan to reduce this debt, just more spending and hope that things work out. The Coalition Government is spending like our national coffers are bottomless, but it is our children and grandchildren who will be left to pay the exorbitant price.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am tired of the sermons and speeches by the honourable Minister for Finance that the deficit will be lower next year, but every year, the deficit is increasing. Sometimes, I wonder if debt is really being paid, and if it is really being paid, it should be decreasing from \$9.1 billion, and not rising to \$10.8 billion, with a projection to climb to \$11.7 billion by July 2026, showing no sign of debt reduction. This Government preaches fiscal responsibility, but continues unnecessary spending, all on the back of borrowed money, compounding the burden on future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister for Finance, confirmed in his Budget Address, a 3 percent pay rise for civil servants. The salary increase for the Civil Service was eagerly anticipated by civil servants. The proposed increase is far short of what the two teacher unions were lobbying for.

Salary increases sounds impressive, but according to many civil servants, the 3 percent increase is inadequate against the ever increasing cost of living with escalating inflation over the last two years. Many were thinking that there would be some relief in this Budget for them, but sadly, it is not there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the modest pay increase approved for civil servants will have a trickle-down effect. Brain drain will continue, and we can expect severe skill crisis in all the sectors. There is already shortage of qualified teachers, and the modest pay increase will worsen the situation. Shortage of qualified teachers in primary and secondary schools is directly impacting education quality and student outcomes. We are losing nurses, teachers, engineers and many more.

There is no plan to stop the brain drain. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the brain drain is creating a cycle where low pay leads to low retention, which results in lower quality education and further erosion of the professions standing. We are basically training our best people for Australia and New Zealand. The Government should provide incentives to retain skilled workers in Fiji so that staying in Fiji is worth it. Without addressing economic incentives, efforts to recruit and retain teachers would fail.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need action from the Coalition Government, but the Government doing nothing about the skill gap crisis is the real crisis. It is heartbreaking to see our best people leave the

country. Fijians will seek work where the salaries and wages are better aligned to living costs, as every Fijian has the responsibility to look after his or her own interest first, as no one else will. If civil servants have better opportunities overseas, where the pay and conditions of work are better, they will go for it.

Nation building is very important, but the nation should also ensure that the Government look after our civil servants in their employment. Pay civil servants what they are worth and there will not be a skill or labour crisis in Fiji. A great budget does one simple thing - it makes people want to stay in the country. The demoralised teaching workforce is due to inadequate pay.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the \$200 Back-to-School support for our children from families with household income of less than \$50,000, is a welcome measure, but I was hoping for an increase to offset the rise in the cost of living. The Government gives \$200 for school, but then students leave school and sit around jobless. In the last five years, the highest number of students who dropped out of school was in 2023, where more than 1,000 students dropped out of school before completing Year 8. This alarming increase in school dropouts, compared to previous years, is a monumental concern for Fiji's education sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to counter the school dropout problem, the Government should come up with innovative initiatives. Children are the world's most valuable resource and our nation's best hope for the future. They are the future of our country and we must ensure all of them are educated. If the Coalition Government fails to address the issue of school dropouts, we will see a tragic increase of our youths on the streets, vulnerable to crime. While Back-to-School support is beneficial, the Government must present comprehensive and innovative strategies to fix escalating problems like school dropouts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 'Schools Under Siege' was the stark headline of a daily newspaper on 30th June, 2025. The paper reported that Fiji's education system is under siege from the increasing influence of illicit drugs. It was also highlighted in the paper that the Substance Abuse Advisory Council is calling for immediate solutions after the number of student abusers reported cases exceeded 20,000 last year. Fiji is faced with a growing crisis with thousands of students affected. The Coalition Government must give this crisis the priority it demands, and implements robust solutions that protect our students and secure their future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$65 million is allocated for Free Education Grant (FEG) for more than 225,000 students. There is no change in the FEG formula to schools since 2020. The VAT was increased to 15 percent, but FEG to schools remain unchanged. Our small schools, particularly those in rural, remote and outer communities are struggling immensely to provide students with modern teaching and learning resources, and a conducive learning environment, precisely because they receive significantly less grant money.

We have a lot of schools with rolls less than 50 and between 50 and 100. A school with a roll of 52 students receives merely \$17,364 per year. This Government must seriously consider a substantial increase in FEG for all schools. Education and, more importantly, equitable access to quality education is the cornerstone of individual and societal development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now the spending power has been handed to school management. The Ministry of Education should closely monitor and ensure every dollar of taxpayer's money achieves its purpose. Spending should be guided by clear policy and guidelines and there should be regular performance audits to ensure money is used for the right purpose. The Ministry of Education must be vigilant and proactive to ensure that important areas like teaching and learning resources are not neglected and students are provided with a conducive learning environment.

I welcome the Government's plan to recruit 1,125 new teachers. I sincerely hope this will genuinely address the critical teacher shortage crisis. It was recently highlighted in the media that some

students were without teachers for most of last year, directly leading to very poor performance in their external examinations. It was also widely reported that a secondary school in Cakaudrove is facing a severe teacher shortage, forcing students to travel long distances or relocate to other schools entirely. These are unacceptable realities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the announcement that fundraising will now be open means schools can engage in fundraising throughout the year at the expense of crucial teaching and learning hours. Instead of genuinely increasing the Free Education Grant, this Government is shifting the financial burden onto students, teachers, and parents. Who will monitor this fundraising?

Monitoring is already a significant issue for the Ministry of Education. From experience, I can confidently vouch that effective fundraising without teachers' and students' direct involvement is simply impossible. One of the very reasons the Free Education Grant was introduced in 2014 was precisely to move away from fundraising and re-focus on teaching and learning. The Free Education Grant eased the immense financial burden on parents, students, teachers and the school management committees. Now, Mr. Speaker Sir, we are going back to where we were two decades ago. This is the real change this Government is delivering.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome the Government's decision to regularise ECE teachers appointments, placing them on equal footing with other teaching staff. I have always acknowledged immensely the important role of ECE teachers. Two decades ago, ECE teachers were paid as low as \$30 a week. The previous Government recognised the critical role of ECE teachers and gave a huge increment after the Job Evaluation Exercise in 2017. In 2018, the Government further recognized the importance of ECE teachers and absorbed them in the Civil Service. Sir, ECE teachers contribute significantly to the broader school environment, and they deserve good pay.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2025-2026 Budget is nothing more than a political survival package. There is no economic vision, and certainly no credible path to reducing our escalating national debt. Fijians were promised change. What they have received is a government buying time with recklessly borrowed money.

Fiji's 2025–2026 National Budget is short-sighted, debt-heavy, and dangerously out-of-touch plan that prioritises quick political wins, while tragically ignoring the country's most pressing and fundamental problems. From the alarming rise in school dropouts to severe skill gap crisis, from poor road conditions to irregular bus services in rural areas, from our broken hospitals to the blatant rural neglect - this budget offers no real, substantive solution. Instead, we are presented with temporary handouts and the dangerous addiction to more borrowing.

This budget is all noise, no substance. It addresses short-term relief but fails to address the deep cracks and systemic failures that have emerged and worsened in Fiji's economy and society over the last two years under this Government. I call on the Coalition Government to stop feeding on empty slogans and start delivering genuine, long-term solutions for the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I cannot, in good conscience support this budget. It is short-sighted, debt-heavy, dangerously out-of-touch, and offers no real solutions for the pressing challenges facing our nation. Therefore, I do not support this budget.

HON. A. BIA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen – *ni sa bula vinaka* and a very good afternoon to you all. I would also like to extend a warm *bula vinaka* to those watching from the comfort of their homes or workplaces.

My contribution to today's Budget Debate is to elaborate and expand upon the funding allocation specifically relating to the portfolios for which I serve as Assistant Minister - the Ministry of Information and National Archives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fight against poverty, misinformation and disengagement requires that every Fijian be fully and accurately informed. This, as the honourable Prime Minister emphasized this morning, is a key role of the Ministry of Information. He has further directed the Ministry to take on a revitalized, strategic role as the frontline communicator of Government action and public accountability. That, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the Ministry's clear mission in the 2025-2026 Financial Year.

For this period, the Ministry has been allocated over \$15 million of which majority or approximately over 77 percent is allocated for the Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) Grant. Since the beginning of this year, the PSB Grant has been extended to three additional broadcasters. Alongside Fijian Broadcasting Corporation's radio and television services, *Mai TV* and *Fiji Television* have now signed their PSB Grant Television agreements. Communications Fiji Limited signed their agreement for radio services in April this year.

The objective of the PSB Grant for both radio and television is very clear. As in past governments, the policy was introduced to promote local talent, ensure programming diversity, and provide wider public service content. In broader terms, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the PSB Grant aims to raise the standard of quality broadcasting -offering unbiased information and a mix of local and international content, aligned with Fiji's unique cultural context and the Government's policy on nation-building.

When tenders were called during this Financial Year, both radio and television broadcasters were invited to submit proposals that would entertain, inform, and educate the public, with a strong emphasis on high-quality programming. These, Mr. Speaker, Sir, include:

- (1) development of programmes aimed at nation-building;
- (2) emergency broadcasts in all major languages during national emergencies or threats to public safety;
- (3) content focusing on national development, leadership, and governance;
- (4) promotion of national and cultural heritage; and
- (5) coverage of special social and community events of national interest.

That is why, Mr. Speaker, Sir, radio and television audiences will be seeing more development-oriented programmes across all radio and television services. For instance, listeners of Communications Fiji Limited - English, Fijian and Hindustani stations should already be hearing sustained, focussed campaigns on HIV, Non-Communicable Diseases, gender-based violence, disaster awareness, climate change, drug abuse, crime prevention and nation building. The topics addressed in these locally produced programmes are timely and highly relevant. They complement the Coalition Government's national campaign on nation building and development. Our whole-of-society effort to combat poverty, drug abuse, rising crime rates, HIV and NCDs will be significantly supported through the PSB Grant.

In this regard, I fully support the honourable Prime Minister's assertion that transparent communication is no longer optional – it is mission critical. This is precisely the impact the PSB Grant is intended to deliver through the Ministry of Information. With the support of our PSB partners, Fijian Broadcasting Corporation, *Mai TV*, *Fiji Television* and Communications Fiji Limited, the Ministry will also fulfil the honourable Prime Minister's directive that every voice, in every language, in every corner of Fiji is heard and informed. The Ministry will fulfil that promise that every voice, in every language, in every corner of Fiji is heard and informed. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is now equipped to provide real-time, accurate and reliable information, as the honourable Prime Minister who also serves as the Minister for Information affirmed earlier today.

I would like to take this opportunity to also publicly acknowledge and commend the British Government through the British High Commission in Suva for sponsoring a three-year capacity building programme in public communication. This initiative has trained communication officers at the Ministry and Media Liaison Officers across all Government Ministries. Led by experts from the UK Government Communication Service, the training covers vital areas such as strategic communication, media crisis management, public relations, speech writing, media monitoring and social media management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry's portfolio also includes the National Archives of Fiji which has been allocated around \$1.4 million for the 2025-2026 Financial Year. The department comprises of 25 staff members and is led by the Director of National Archives. As the honourable Prime Minister highlighted in his contribution today, this funding will ensure the continuation of digitisation projects, infrastructure upgrades and workforce development. A major focus of digitisation is on the Indian immigration records. To-date, approximately 75 percent of these records have been digitised. With additional funding, the National Archives aims to complete this important work in the coming months. As Members of this august House will agree, this initiative is not only about preserving historical records but also about making our shared history accessible to all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the coming financial year will also see continued capital works at the National Archives. Procurement is also underway for a new server and training of an IT specialist in digital records management. The Archives currently store over 2,000 hours of audiovisual material and more than 200,000 photographs.

Once digitized and made available online, the National Archives will be fulfilling its dual, legally mandated roles:

- promoting knowledge-based society development through evidence and education; and
- supporting good governance through robust government record keeping.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset, please allow me to again mention some of the key announcements in the budget that matters to the people of Fiji and the heartbeat on the ground. Many Fijians took to social media to welcome the bold decision by Government to decrease VAT from 15 percent to 12.5 percent which should start from the beginning of next month. Many social welfare recipients also welcome the 5 percent increase in their monthly allowance as this will somehow ease their daily burdens and navigate challenges as it comes their way.

Please, allow me to make this statement in this august House. To all Fijians, as a Government, we do accept the fact that we cannot make everyone happy, and this Coalition Government will not hide away from that, but will confront it with all truth and honesty. It is unrealistic as well to make every citizen happy. However, the Coalition Government will ensure that it introduces policies and initiatives that promote societal wellbeing and collective human empowerment.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, I wish to respond to some of the comments made by the honourable Leader of the Opposition in his response to the Budget earlier this morning. In one of his comments, he stated that the budget lacks clarity, but listening to his response, I found that it lacks clarity as well. In one of his statements he mentioned that the Government needs to reduce its size, but then later in his response, he mentioned that Government needs to appoint another Minister to look after state-owned enterprises only. He also labelled the budget as a high-spending one and a panic budget.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A. BIA.- To reply to this, I will echo the same challenge that used to be echoed by the former Finance Minister and former Attorney-General to the former Opposition Members, I would challenge the honourable Leader of the Opposition to provide an alternative budget, to really show the people of Fiji that you have better alternatives from what has been delivered in the budget.

The other statement he made, Mr. Speaker, the rhetoric does not match the action. The delivery of the 2025-2026 National Budget clearly demonstrates that the Coalition Government does not just talk the talk, they are working it and moving forward, and that work does not have to be long strides, because baby steps are counted too.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for the opportunity to speak and respond to the Budget Address. I am pleased to express my full support to the 2025-2026 National Budget that was presented to this House. May God continue to bless our beloved Fiji and its people.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, I rise with a responsibility and deep sense of duty, not just as a Member of Parliament, but as a son of Fiji, elected by the people in 2018 and again in 2022, to be their voice in this august Chamber.

Before I start my speech proper, I express my heartfelt condolence in the passing of the late honourable Vatimi Rayalu, former Minister for Agriculture, whose contribution to Fiji as a Minister is unmatched by most of the Ministers in the People's Coalition Government.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- I extend my deepest sympathies to his wife, children and to his family. May his legacy continue to inspire us and may he rest in peace.

Mr. Speaker, I rise strongly to condemn the despicable and cowardly act of breaking idols last week in the Shiv Temple; an act that is not only criminal but deeply offensive to the religious beliefs and sentiments of our fellow citizens. Such desecration is an attack on the very fabric of our multi-cultural and multi-faith society. It seeks to incite fear, division and hatred, and we must not allow that to take root. Let us be clear; there is no place in Fiji for religious intolerance or violence in any form. The perpetrators of this vile act must be brought to justice. I call upon the House and all community leaders to speak with one voice in and in defence of the principles of respect, religious freedom and peace that define our democracy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a budget is a financial plan that projects future income and expenses over a specific period, and one can make a very rosy picture of the budget but achieving the target is another story. The People's Coalition has been increasing the operating expenditure and reducing the capital expenditure since they came into power in 2022. This leads to poor infrastructure, poor medical facilities and many more other essential services, which deprive our ordinary Fijians for whom this Government promised to look after.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have been told that a large number of recently graduated doctors have not been posted, although we have a shortage of doctors in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the People's Coalition Government has money to spend - more than \$2 million of taxpayers' funds on the Commission of Inquiry (COI) report, when the people in charge failed to appoint the right individuals to key positions and the Government chartered a flight to Israel which costs approximately \$2.3 million but cannot fix roads, solve water problems and give better medical facilities to our people.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr Speaker, Sir, there is an increase to all sector pensioners, except for Fiji Ex-Servicemen Aftercare Fund.

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- I am talking about the ex-servicemen. These people have served and looked after our nation and here, honourable Bulitavu, is laughing about that, but the Government has nothing in this Budget on that. I recommend that this be reconsidered.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have been reliably informed that the new reservoir construction at Nawaicoba in Nadi is on hold since last year. I hope there is funding in this year's Budget to complete the pending work so that the people of Nadi can have a better piped and clean water supply.

Furthermore, I urge the Government to replace the low-lying bridges with high-rise structures to facilitate the poor farmers and their children, who struggle to come to school during rainy days. During rainy days, it causes transportation problem which leads to loss of revenue for farmers, that is, economic losses, loss of quality teaching time and safety risks. The bridges of Buabua and Arolevu in Nadi needs urgent attention as people are suffering during rainy season.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is almost a similar capital budget for FRA compared to the 2024-2025 fiscal year. Maintaining a similar budget for the FRA as in previous years without a real increase poses significant risks to road safety, economic productivity and infrastructure resilience. This will result in serious shortfalls - funds exhausted, early backlogs growing, and urgent maintenance delay. This may be one of the reasons for poor service delivery in the infrastructure sector, as we have seen poor road conditions all around the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the People's Coalition Government has been harping of investments. How can it be possible when they cannot facilitate piped water, electricity supply and sewer system to new upcoming subdivisions in Nadawa, Nasinu? When Fiji needs to curb the rise of informal settlements, subdivisions of this magnitude need to be encouraged as the infrastructure provider is the Government of the day.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, land is scarce. It is not just a source of income, it is a source of identity and dignity for thousands of Fijians, both *iTaukei* and Indo-Fijians. Today, I raise serious concerns about the uncertainty of our land tenure system, particularly when it comes to agricultural leases. Many farmers, especially in the sugarcane belts of Western and Northern Divisions are left hanging with short-term or expiring leases. What will happen to those lessees?

The honourable Minister for Sugar wants to increase the productivity of sugarcane while at the other hand, it is hard to get the renewal of leases, uncertainty to the good cane-producing farmers. Landowners too deserve timely payments and fair returns, but the system today benefits neither the tenant nor the landowners. It is broken and it is being ignored.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have been reliably informed that *iTaukei* landowners are asking goodwill from lessees whose leases are about to expire, which is illegal. I request the authorities to look into it, and the premium and rental to be assessed by registered valuers in the *iTaukei* Land Trust Board (iTLTB), which will be fair and reasonable to all parties.

I urge the Government to consider a national consultation on land lease reform, with the involvement of the iTLTB, tenant associations, landowning units and policy experts. We must restore

confidence in the land sector for agriculture, housing and investment. This is not just about leases, it is about our future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this year's Budget, the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources has been given \$5 million for Freehold Land Buyback Policy. Rather than spending millions to buy back freehold land, that same money could be better used to develop native land which is abundant, underutilised and held in trust by *iTaukei* people who lack capital, not land.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to improve Fiji's productivity and drive inclusive economic growth, we must unlock the full potential of *iTaukei* land, not by owning more land but by developing what we already have. Much of the land remains undeveloped or underutilised, not because of lack of land, but due to lack of infrastructure, capital and access to markets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, *iTaukei* land can contribute to agricultural expansion as it is ideal for commercial agriculture and food security. The other contributions of the *iTaukei* land are housing and urban growth, tourism and small and micro enterprises development and job creation. Sir, *iTaukei* land is not a political football to be kicked around for votes or blamed, it is a national asset rich in opportunity, history and potential. Instead of using it for political point scoring, we must focus on its development to benefit landowners and the nation alike.

Let us not sugarcoat the reality on the ground. The cost of living is crippling our people. What has this Government offered in response? A mere 2.5 percent drop in VAT – a symbolic gesture that does not go nearly far enough. This country needs real relief, not vote-buying budgets filled with band-aid measures. Every time an election comes near, we suddenly see flashy announcements, cash in hand campaigns and shallow promises. The people of Fiji are not naive. They deserve better than a political theatre. If this Government is serious about easing pressure, then remove VAT from all essential food and medicine. Do not balance the national budget on the backs of poor. Tax luxury is not survival.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, everywhere I go around Viti Levu, I hear the same stories – frustration, exhaustion, and hopelessness. People are not asking for miracles, they are asking for fairness. They want their roads fixed, their water to run and their children to go to school without being turned away for fees. They want Members of Parliament who listen, not just during elections, but everyday.

It is heartbreaking that even after years of development rhetoric, many rural Fijians still walk miles to fetch water and some still light kerosene lanterns in 2025. How is that acceptable? We must shift our focus away from press releases and towards people-centred policies. Real development is not measured by the number of ribbon-cuttings but by how many lives we lift.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all must learn from a great young leader, Mr. Ibrahim Traore of Burkina Faso, who is sacrificing his life to bring his country together with fairness and equal rights to all citizens, and we also need one like him.

I may now be an independent Member of Parliament but that will not stop me from holding Government accountable or from speaking truth to power, nor will it stop me from working with anyone in this House on either side, if it means improving the lives of our people.

I came to serve the people of Fiji and I remain committed to working with integrity, consistency and with the kind of honesty that Fijians are yearning for their leaders. Let us move away from politics of division and deception. Let us lead with compassion, truth and courage.

This country is at a crossroad. The challenges are real and the solutions will not come from more committees, more slogans, or more of the same. We need bold leadership, rooted in service. We need real



economic reform, honest land lease solutions and budgets that reflect empathy, not election strategy.

Mr. Speaker Sir, before I conclude my speech, I would like to congratulate the newly installed Tui Nayau, as my father was a great supporter and follower of late Tui Nayau, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, during the Alliance Government and I have lot of respect to the late Tui Nayau.

Also, I would like to thank the Commissioner of Police for his hard work and responding to our calls, even if he is busy. I hope he continues with the good work he is doing, not forgetting the honourable Minister for Immigration, who is always there to advise and help the Fijians whenever we need him, unlike most Ministers who are afraid to pick up their mobile phone.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the Permanent Secretary for Finance, Mr. Shri Goundar and his team, for their effort in compiling this Budget and I hope the honourable Minister for Finance will implement it. I commit myself to this cause as an independent Member of Parliament - unafraid to speak, unafraid to act, and above all, unafraid to stand for what is right.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is an honour to rise in this august Chamber to speak in support of the 2025-2026 budgetary allocation for the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, a Ministry entrusted with safeguarding Fiji's natural wealth, and delivering our national response to the climate crisis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget places high emphasis on supporting the enforcement of core environmental legislation, supports the improvement of waste management infrastructure, and seeks to strengthen national climate governance. The Budget is implementation focussed - supporting our officers across the country to deliver against their duties and responsibilities under the Environment Management Act 2005 and the Climate Change Act 2021, and their associated regulations.

For the 2025-2026 financial year, the Ministry is allocated a total of \$10.8 million of which, \$8.4 million is for operational functions and \$2.36 million for capital projects, particularly the completion of the Naboro Landfill Cell Construction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change is aware of the need to scale these capital projects, such that it accommodates the need for other divisions where waste management continues to pose significant threats to the environment and human health.

We have been working closely with the Ministry of Local Government and Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation to finalise the terms of reference for the construction of the Western and Northern Landfill projects. Both projects are currently at the design stage, and the Ministry of Environment will play a key role in ensuring that these projects include waste segregation and transfer stations, such that the perception of landfills is different to what we have in Naboro. This is critical because there are many untapped economic opportunities in such investments if designed with a full life-cycle approach. This is not just about waste, this is about jobs, dignity and lifting standards for the next generation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is also mindful of the urgent need to rehabilitate the current dumpsites, such as the one in Vunato and Sigatoka, which remain an eye sore and poses significant health threats and risks to our communities. In partnership with the United Nations Industrial Development Organization and the United Nations Environmental Programme, we will be co-designing long-term solutions for those dumpsites. We are not just talking - we are doing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will now go into the specifics of the operational increments. Programme 1 includes seven key activities under General Administration and Department of Environment functions, with an overall increase of \$1.47 million. Activity 1 - General Administration is allocated \$2.02 million,

with an increase of around \$590,000 to account for the growing scope of the Ministry since it became a standalone ministerial portfolio in October 2023. This allocation ensures that the Ministry is properly staffed, equipped and supported to deliver on its mandates, whether it is in relation to the implementation of environmental regulation, operational oversight of climate risk management, or through the implementation of environment and climate change-related international treaties.

Key improvements under this activity include:

- \$80,000 for personnel emoluments to fund the appointment of additional administrative staff needed to support the newly established ministry.
- \$100,000 for trash boom equipment, which are floating barriers that have already proven effective in places like Nabukalou Creek, where over 612 kilogrammes of waste have been collected since its instalment in February this year. In the next financial year, trash booms will be installed in three litter hotspots along the Suva-Nausori corridor and Nadi.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another critical investment under Activity 1 is the hosting of the 6th Asia Pacific Environment Ministers and Authorities Forum (AP6), which was approved by Cabinet in October last year. By hosting AP6, Fiji is not waiting to be spoken for - we are speaking for ourselves and for the Blue Pacific. We are convening, leading and shaping the agenda.

The benefits of hosting this forum far outweigh the marginal allocation of \$146,000 in this Budget and I would like to thank the Government of Australia for the US\$300,000 grant to support with the costs related to this meeting. This is not just any meeting, but a historic first for the Pacific, as Fiji will become the first island country to host this prestigious gathering of environmental leaders from 41 countries across Asia and the Pacific region. This event will allow Fiji to chair critical high-level deliberations, influence decisions and support our collective regional voice ahead of the 7th United Nations Environment Assembly where major global decisions on climate and environment issues are debated and agreed upon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Activity 2 relates to the functions of the Environmental Impact Assessment Unit where an additional \$349,000 was allocated to support the Ministry with their monitoring and enforcement functions. Some of the major increases include a \$232,000 increase in personal emoluments, which funds the recruitment of four additional Environment Officers. These new staff are responsible for conducting environmental audits, site inspections and post-approval monitoring of developments.

Last year alone, we received several complaints where developers were not complying with the environmental laws and lease conditions. This Government is not afraid to enforce the law. Our communities are watching and we will not fail them.

Mr. Speaker, in the 2024-2025 financial year, officers in the EIA Unit processed more than 1,300 EIA applications, including the backlog of 378 files from January 2024. This demonstrates that we have the capabilities but we need capacities to deliver these services to meet increasing investment demands. We also need investors both, local and foreign, to equally respect the laws of Fiji and do their part.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been doing the long hours to minimise the risk of delays, but it is clear that we must increase our capacity and buff our team from the strain of the increasing demand we face. In light of that, a further \$95,000 is allocated to scale up compliance and enforcement of EIA permits. That will help cover the costs involved in conducting field investigations in relation to development activities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, overall, we have the duty to protect our fragile ecosystems. Therefore, environmental laws must be adhered to, such that community land and community interests are protected from harmful impacts, and economic benefits and growth do not come at an undue cost. Our people

deserve to know that when someone invests, when a resort development proceeds, or a road is built, that it has been properly assessed and approved, and will be monitored to ensure compliance over time. This budget makes sure that happens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Activity 3 relates to the core functions of the Waste Management and Pollution Control Unit, which has received an additional allocation of \$216,000. This increase is both strategic and long overdue. One of the major initiatives under this allocation is the establishment of a small-scale environmental laboratory, which received an allocation of \$100,000. This lab will significantly enhance our enforcement capabilities by allowing the Ministry to conduct in-house testing of water, air and chemical parameters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need real-time enforcement. Let me be clear, when there is an oil spill like the recent incident in the Suva Harbour from the sunken Goundar Shipping vessel, or wastewater discharge like the one from Line One in Sabeto, we must respond immediately, and our people expect accountability, not excuses.

The current model, which relies on accredited third-party laboratories, can take up to two weeks. That is two weeks too late. With our own testing facilities provided for in this Budget, we can collect samples, test them and initiate enforcement action without delay. The public expects us to act swiftly and now, we will be equipped to do just that. In addition, \$48,000 under this activity is dedicated to strengthening the enforcement of our Litter Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Activity 4 covers the management of ozone depleting substances, which received no increase in this year's allocation. However, it remains essential in helping Fiji to meet its obligations under the Montreal Protocol.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Activity 5 supports Fiji's implementation of the 13 Multilateral Environmental Agreements we have ratified. It received an additional \$214,000 this financial year. Key allocations include:

- (1) \$75,000 for the National Resource Owners Committee (NROC), which is an advisory committee that connects the work of the Mata ni Yaubula from the 14 Provinces with that of the Provincial Conservation Officers (PCOs), under the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs. The Mata ni Yaubula and the PCOs play a pivotal role in ensuring that environmental and climate laws and policies are adequately enforced, implemented and monitored. Put plainly, they are the traditional guardians of our ancestral resources.
- (2) \$11,500 is to support the ratification of three long-pending conventions, the:
  - (a) Basel Convention, which regulates hazardous waste movement;
  - (b) Rotterdam Convention, which promotes prior informed consent in chemical trade; and the
  - (c) Minamata Convention, which aims to control mercury pollution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, ratifying these Conventions strengthens our legal framework, improves safeguards for public health, and aligns Fiji with the global environment standards.

Finally, in Programme 1, we have Activities 6 and 7 which account for the operation of divisional offices in the North and West, as well as a dedicated Project Management Unit which is created to oversee externally funded environmental and climate projects. Its role is to improve coordination, enhance delivery and ensure that every dollar entrusted to Fiji delivers maximum impact.

We are currently delivering US\$7.2 million in Safeguarding Marine and Terrestrial Biodiversity Project, focussing on interventions in selected islands including the Lau Group, Kadavu and the Cakaudrove Ringgold Islands. This five-year project is implemented in partnership with Conservation International.

In the upcoming year, we will also begin implementation of the US\$8.3 million Revitalizing Ecosystems for Sustainable Agriculture and Resilience Project. This project will benefit about 3,500 households in the Northern Division, and will be implemented in partnership with the International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD). This Unit also administers subsidised gate fees at the Naboro landfill, with \$1 million allocated for this by Cabinet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Programme 2 covers the work of the Department of Climate Change. For the 2025-2026 financial year, this programme is allocated \$1.91 million, which is an increase of \$203,000. The key components of this increase include:

- \$106,000 for the establishment of a Carbon Market Unit, which will support the operationalisation of the carbon market regulations, unlock climate finance, and support emissions reduction projects.
- A further \$500,000 is allocated to support the implementation of the Climate Change Act 2021. This includes development of regulations for certain parts of the Act and finalisation of the Fiji's National Climate Communication Strategy.

This allocation will also enable us to mobilise finance, attract carbon investment, and regulate markets with integrity, accountability and benefit to our people. This would consistently align with the tax incentive on carbon trading where income of businesses engaged in carbon trading will be exempted from income tax as announced in this Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this morning, the honourable Leader of the Opposition referred to 50 Villages needing relocation and cited the Human Rights Commission list of 19 additional communities. Let me clarify; they are not confirmed relocation sites, they are communities identified for assessment, not evacuation orders.

Fiji treats planned relocation strictly as a last resort. Under our SOP, relocation can only proceed after all adaptation options have been exhausted and only with full community consent through a process grounded in free, prior and informed consent. The 19 communities mentioned are a subset of 43 communities screened since 2021. Some have since shifted to other adaptation measures like seawall, backed by donors, such as the Adaptation Fund. Others remain under assessment through a rigorous two-tier vetting process with divisional coordination.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Taskforce on Relocation and Displacement is driving this work and supporting communities that want to relocate and helping others adapt in place. We are also actively securing more funding for future relocation needs. Take Nabavatu, for example, a relocation based on risk backed by community choice and now in Phase 2, supported by \$3.5 million injection from the Community Relocation Trust Fund in the last two weeks. These are not numbers, these are families, lives, the future, and this Government will continue to act based on evidence gathered by community voice and also with the principle of dignity and choice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, building on our efforts in relocating communities, the Ministry will now focus on expediting the implementation of coastal adaptation seawall. We will work closely with the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways to identify seawall projects across coastal communities that need to be constructed urgently, including a few to mention in the existing priority list such as Votua in Nadroga,

Sese and Loa in Cakaudrove, Sogobiau and Namama in Macuata, Namuana in Kadavu, Saioko in Ra and Nabuna in Koro.

Vulnerable communities continue to lose land and homes to rising seas, coastal and river flooding. That has to end and this Government will prioritise high-risk sites, secure financing and ensure that every dollar invested in coastal protection reaches the front lines where the climate crisis is being felt most adequately.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Leader of the Opposition also called for greater investment in clean energy this morning. We welcome that but let us be clear, Fiji is already doing the work. Initiatives such as:

- (1) The Fiji Rural Electrification Fund where we are bringing solar power to off-grid communities, turning commitment into action.
- (2) Our updated National Energy Policy and NDCs which are shaping a clear path towards clean energy, aligned with our development goals.
- (3) We know that a transition must just be economically viable, that means securing the right technologies that is affordable, build on capacity and making sure that this job transition needs to happen in a way that no one is left behind.

Yes, the shift must happen, but this Government is not waiting. We have been working closely with Ministries and this will be reflected in our updated NDC, one that is backed by an implementation plan.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change has brought together key portfolios and this budget will further operationalise the expansion of our services and capacity. It is an investment in the future, our people, our land and our sovereignty.

This year, the Ministry has already successfully implemented 94 percent of its allocated budget, a clear reflection of our discipline, delivery and alignment with the Strategic Development Plan, National Development Plan and the broader socio-economic vision of the Coalition Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2025-2026 Budget is more than a financial blueprint, it is a bold and a people-focused plan for Fiji's future. It is built on economic discipline, social fairness and political honesty. It responds to the pain of cost of living, it invests in our community, it protects the most vulnerable, while creating space for growth and opportunities.

While others continue to debate, we deliver and continue to see momentum. For example, the GDP growth of 7.5 percent in 2023 and 4.0 percent in 2024, foreign reserve is stable at \$3.7 billion, tourism jobs investment is surging, and most importantly, families are feeling the impact with \$250 million in VAT cuts and over \$500 million in combined tax relief through the continued zero-rating for essential items. That is the proof of fiscal credibility.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am proud that our Ministries' priorities are embedded in this Budget from the relocation of at-risk communities to coastal protection projects and advancing cleaner waste systems. We are not just responding to climate change and the environment challenges, but we are reshaping Fiji's future with urgency and purpose, and with political courage. This Budget speaks directly to our collective vision, economic security, conclusive development and sustainability.

Just before I take my seat, we hear the rhetoric this morning from those in the Opposition saying that this is an election Budget. I think they are worried because they are trying to collect signatures. I think there are two proposed parties in the Opposition.

(Laughter)

The people are so happy about this Government and this Budget and they do not want to sign and support the registration of those political parties. That is an indication, and I see the urgency and the worry in the Opposition.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Where you came from and where you are?

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

(Laughter)

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- The worry in the Opposition, the election is too far away, but we can see the Opposition that is disorganised and confused. Mr. Speaker, Sir, one G1 there, one G14 here. Honourable Pillay just told me that he is going to form another group.

(Laughter)

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- So that is a divided and a confused Opposition that the people cannot trust. I support and commend the 2025-2026 Budget to this august House.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; firstly, let me thank you for allowing me the opportunity to contribute on the Budget, announced by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics on Monday, 27th June, 2025. I also wish to thank and congratulate the honourable Deputy Prime Minister for his two-hour Budget Address.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my contribution today will cover the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts. I will also look at the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, Ministry of Immigration, Fiji Corrections Service, Ministry of Fisheries and Ministry of Forestry. I also intend to make some general comments on the Budget itself within my allocated 20 minutes, if time permits.

At the outset, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me state that the Budget announced by the honourable Minister for Finance was to be expected. The 2025-2026 Budget tries to cushion the impact of the increase of VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent, an increase of 6 percent announced in his first Budget back in 2023.

The increase of 15 percent VAT has ballooned the cost of living to unimaginable levels. People have suffered enough, and we will continue to suffer with a reduction of a mere 2.5 percent. The 2.5 percent reduction will never change the cost of goods and services, as the market will adjust and adapt to maintain their bottom lines.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to cover the various areas I have been tasked to examine. The Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts' actual expenditure in the 2024-2025 Budget was \$33.1 million out of an estimated \$39.3 million. The estimate for 2025-2026 stands at \$41.2 million, an increase of \$1.8 million. I observed that operating grants and transfers take the major bulk of the expenditure at \$19.7 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister for Finance has concentrated his emphasis in the promotion of our indigenous Fijians in education, employment, business, and overall, economic development. I have a plea to the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs, please, divert some attention to allocate some resources to the core fabric of the iTaukei social structures that exist today.

The honourable Minister needs to address the social issues affecting our iTaukei youth. We need to find a way to better administer the young iTaukei, especially within our existing social structures and address the problems of drugs, HIV/AIDS, the breakdown of the rule of law and order, especially in our rural setting of villages and settlements.

I acknowledge the provision of monthly allowances for Turaga in Koro and Mata ni Tikina and Vanua leadership. We must empower them to assist in our overall efforts of instilling discipline and respect for the rule of law.

On the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, the Ministry will receive an increase of \$1 million, bringing their total budget to \$10.8million for 2025-2026. My understanding is that the Ministry will have close collaboration with other resource-based Ministries, such as the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Fisheries and Ministry of Forestry.

I am confident that the Ministry is working together with other relevant agencies in the implementation of the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Agreement (BBNJ) and engage in the Intergovernmental Committee on Plastic Pollution. Mr. Speaker, Sir, pollution in general is a challenge to our pristine environment and I would encourage the honourable Minister to work with other government agencies and NGOs to tackle this issue together.

On the Ministry of Immigration, I note the budgetary provision of \$17.8 million for the Ministry. I additionally note the amount of capital purchase of \$3 million and I can also see that \$5.5 million has been allocated for passports. I must acknowledge the assistance provided to the honourable Minister and the Ministry, to our people who have difficulty in seeking passport assistance in the recent past.

On Fiji Corrections Service, I was amazed with the allocation of \$62.5 million that is given to the institution when compared to other similar government agencies. I simply compared the allocation to the Republic of Fiji Navy, as I am more familiar with that agency. They have been allocated an annual budget of just \$18.3 million. It basically reminded me, Mr. Speaker, of the enormous task that Fiji is trying to grapple with, as far as law and order is concerned, and by recent indications, that will continue to grow. Salary alone stands at \$14.2 million. However Mr. Speaker, I take my hat off to the men and women of the Corrections Service and I wish them well. I am now more aware and understand the enormous task that is bestowed upon them.

On the Ministry of Fisheries, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome the increased allocation to the Ministry as I consider that resource-based agency and its potential to assist in the reduction of import as import substitution, which is similar to agriculture, if given the necessary support. I would personally like to encourage the honourable Minister and support her efforts in developing aquaculture. I have personally been encouraging investors to invest in aquaculture which has not been an easy task for the Ministry in the past years.

On the Ministry of Forestry, again, I am encouraged with the allocation of \$25 million to the Ministry of Forestry. This is another resource-based industry that can increase our export base and diversify Fiji's economy.

I am encouraged by the allocation of funds to the maritime islands pine schemes, as these communities have looked after these resources for some time. This assistance will benefit the people and generate economic activities in our rural isolated communities. I must declare my interest as my Tikina of Yawe in Kadavu owns a substantial 100 plus hectares of pine forest with a total volume of about 16,000 tonnes.

Mr. Speaker, I have covered the allocated Heads that I had been tasked to cover in my contribution today. Please, allow me to make some general comments on the overall budget and the presentation carried out by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance. The honourable Minister's introductory remarks in the presentation gave away the fact that there would be further borrowing to add to the growing national debt.

The excuses and blaming others for example at the second paragraph of his opening remarks, he stated, and I quote: "...we find ourselves at a point of political uncertainty arising from the Middle East conflicts including the Israel-Iran conflict of an intensity we have not seen for decades." He failed to recognize that the Middle East have been unstable since the re-establishment of Israel as a separate state. Additionally, the Russian/Ukraine war has been going on for some years now, and the Middle East conflict itself is part of our recent history noting conflicts in Lebanon and in Gaza.

It summarises what honourable Deputy Prime Minister Kamikamica used to say about Nabukalou Creek. The creek is now showing the truth, below the calm and clear water at high tide. Nabukalou is experiencing the lowest ebb tide ever, showing the debris and litter at the seabed that has been covered for the last two-and-half years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would call this budget as a "Budget of Reckoning" - full of excuses and blame before hitting Fijians with the reality of more *dinau* added to our national debt. The first 10 pages of the Budget introduction covered this game of blame and excuses.

The national debt in 2021 was \$7.6 billion. It has now ballooned and gone beyond the \$10 billion mark in 2023-2024, this budget will bring the national debt level to \$11.8 billion and projected to increase to \$12.3 billion in 2026.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I somewhat understand the difficult position the honourable Deputy Prime Minister Prasad is placed in. For his last two terms with a total of eight years in the Opposition, he used to call out to government that the national debt level was too high and that we were creating too much *dinau*. Additionally, he used to state, that we as government representatives were going around the world with our begging bowl to ask for grants to assist in direct injection to the annual budget. Let me ask the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning if anything has changed?

Let me say this, without direct assistance from our friends around the world, the budget deficit will not be \$880 million, it would surpass the \$1 billion mark.

To summarise, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2025-2026 Budget can be highlighted as:

- (1) A damage control measure designed to appease our ordinary Fijians and the general public, a public reeling from the two previous budgets.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- At least I can remind you again, honourable Minister.

- (2) Justification for extra ordinary circumstances of the government's own makings, ballooning public expenses by increasing the civil service and the consequential cost due to poor control and lack of good management.
- (3) The wrong decision to raise VAT to 15 percent as it was a huge blunder and the decision resulted in a cost-of-living crises, and that exercise has had a negative effect on the broader economy.



- (4) The reduction of VAT by 2.5 percent is not enough to offset the cost of living as businesses will attempt to retain their margins rather than reduce prices.
- (5) A 5 percent increase in welfare benefits will not be sufficient to match the cost of living as global inflation is expected to rise in the next 12 months.
- (6) This budget is a series of expansionary measures and is merely cosmetic rather than being practical.
- (7) It is an attempt to dazzle with realistically big figures and high-sounding projects. There will not be much hope of this being realized on the ground because of lack of capacity and continuous lack of skilled labour.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance boasts about cutting VAT by 2.5 percent but let us not forget, it was his very action that hiked VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent in his maiden budget speech when MSMEs and ordinary Fijians were still trying to recover from COVID-19. All thanks to the Kalavata Fiscal Review Committee. Let us remember, this was also when they handed Fiji Water a seven-year tax holiday and gave those earnings above \$250,000 a 5 percent salary increase. Now, after facing public outcry, they are handing back barely \$250 million - a token sum and calling it relief. It is like stealing \$100 from someone, giving back \$20 and demanding applause for generosity.

The honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance also tries to claim credit for advancing new zero-rated items worth another \$250 million but the truth is, 21 essential goods like flour, oil, et cetera, were already zero-rated under the previous government. The only real addition is the prescription medications taking it to 22 VAT free items. This is not a bold reform. It is a reluctant, overdue correction of his own policy blunder-driven by panic before the next general election.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Panic budget.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- I will give some break to the honourable Minister.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me close by emphasizing the good governance and observance for the rule of law. As a small island nation, it is imperative that we portray the importance of transparency and accountability. We must seriously engage and practice in the separation of the three arms of Government. We must show our people that we are bound by the law and not above the law. The people of Fiji are watching us closely and their respect for the rule of law will be defined by what we do as their representatives in this Parliament. We cannot expect our people to respect the rule of law if we do not.

I must thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition and other Members who have continuously reminded and fact checked Government on these very important issues of transparency and accountability. I thank, Mr. Speaker, Sir and everyone for their indulgence.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 3.40 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.15 p.m.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise in this august House to offer my full support for the 2025-2026 National Budget. It is the third budget presented by the Coalition Government and it reinforces our deep commitment to security, stability and prosperity for all Fijians. The theme and intent of this Budget aligns fully with our national vision for inclusive growth and resilient development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year's budget theme, "*Building Security, Stability and Prosperity*" comes in the face of global economic uncertainty and domestic challenges. With a revenue projection of \$3.9 billion and an expenditure framework of \$4.8 billion, the budget takes an expansionary approach. It cushions our people from external shocks, prioritises social protection and accelerates investment in public infrastructure. The reduction of VAT from 15 percent to 12.5 percent, the continued zero-rating of 22 essential items and the allocation of over \$800 million in cost-of-living relief all reflect a government that places people at the heart of development.

Our economy has continued its post-COVID recovery with strength. We are estimated to have grown by 4 percent in 2024, driven by tourism, remittances, domestic consumption and increased investor confidence. Importantly, the debt-to-GDP ratio has declined from over 90 percent to 79.8 percent, reflecting prudent fiscal management and our commitment to long-term debt sustainability.

The Government is progressing an ambitious economic and social reform agenda captured in the new National Development Plan, developed through extensive consultations with our people, the NDP offers inclusive and practical solutions for sustainable and equitable progress. Unlike previous plans, this is a blueprint born of nationwide input and it charts a path forward for strategic investment and transformation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to highlight that this budget sends a strong message of commitment to our rural and maritime areas. Our people in these communities have endured decades of neglect marked by poor roads, limited access to basic services and economic marginalisation. Targeted programmes in this budget such as rural road upgrades, borehole projects, rural housing assistance, network connectivity and agricultural support seek to correct this imbalance and bring development directly to the doorstep of every Fijian. As part of this vision, the Ministry has been drafting Fiji's first-ever National Rural Development Policy. This policy will form the foundation for a new era of coordinated, inclusive and integrated development across our rural and maritime zones.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, investment in rural infrastructure is essential to ensuring equal opportunities for all Fijians. With over 40 percent of Fiji's population residing in rural and maritime areas, it is essential that these communities receive the same level of infrastructure development as urban centres. We therefore welcome the \$37 million increase in funding to the Fiji Roads Authority and the \$4.5 million allocation to the Public Works Department for the upgrade and maintenance of rural roads. These efforts will restore access to basic services for many isolated communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through the \$2 million allocated to our Ministry's Community Access Roads, Footpaths and Footbridges (CARFF) Programme in the last budget, we successfully implemented 22 projects. This year, a 12.5 percent increase will expand this reach and complement the work of FRA in enhancing connectivity in rural areas.

We also commend the \$16 million allocated for the maintenance of maritime jetties in Koro, Moala, Lomaloma, Vunisea, Nabouwalu, Savusavu, Taveuni and Rabi. These critical infrastructures support both economic continuity and community resilience in the face of natural hazards.

We further acknowledge the Government's engagement with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to secure financing for rural infrastructure upgrades.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are not just budget lines. They are promises to our people. No child should wade through flooded creeks to reach school. No family should be cut off from health or market access due to broken bridges.

I commend the prioritisation of health care in this budget. The \$465.6 million allocated to the Ministry of Health, alongside \$117.2 million for public-private partnerships in this sector, will strengthen delivery across the country. The \$10.8 million for health centre upgrades in Kadavu and Taveuni is particularly welcomed. We also appreciate the \$2 million support for village-level infrastructure through the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs - Small Projects with profound impacts on wellbeing.

The Rural Housing Assistance Scheme continues to transform lives. Since this Government took office, over 200 rural housing projects have been delivered. With an allocation of \$2.9 million this year, we can do more to address the unmet demand in our villages and settlements. This initiative aligns with our commitment to SDG 11, ensuring access to adequate, safe, and affordable housing for all, particularly in rural communities where the need is most acute.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, water is life. The budget brings with it an unprecedented \$284.4 million injection into the Water Authority of Fiji. In addition, \$6.49 million has been allocated for groundwater development in both large and small islands. We also acknowledge the \$680,000 set aside to address high-risk water issues and note with appreciation the \$1 million provided to our Ministry last year, which enabled the implementation of 20 targeted water and sanitation projects. This year, we redouble our efforts because no Fijian should ever go without access to clean and safe drinking water.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, rural development must be underpinned by economic empowerment. This budget supports that goal through targeted investments in agriculture, forestry, fisheries and vocational training. The \$115.3 million allocation to the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways is a strong step forward. Programmes to improve market access, farm roads, and mechanisation will transform productivity in rural areas.

We commend the \$2.5 million allocated to the Agricultural Marketing Authority (AMA), and the \$980,000 capital grant to Food Processors Fiji. We welcome the \$1.5 million investment in the Maritime Pine Development Scheme and the \$3 million for iTaukei Resource Owners Support and Development Fund – an important vehicle for affordable financing. I also acknowledge the \$10 million grant provided to the Yasawa Tourism Marketing Cooperative, which promotes inclusive and sustainable tourism in the outer islands.

We are especially pleased with the expansion of TVET scholarships and skills-based micro qualifications. This investment in human capital gives rural youth, women and persons with disabilities a real chance at economic independence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Disaster Risk Management Office continues to implement the National DRM Act 2024. We are finalising key regulations to enhance coordination and streamline response, recovery, and preparedness.

We value the ongoing partnerships with Australia and New Zealand, and we will strengthen local disaster committees to ensure a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach.

We value the ongoing partnerships with Australia and New Zealand and we will strengthen local disaster committees to ensure a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. New systems such as the Asset Tracking System and Disaster Risk Information Platforms will bring greater transparency to relief efforts and improve planning for hazard-prone areas.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reiterate my full support for this Budget. It is a Budget that gives hope to the most remote, underserved and resilient Fijians across our islands.

I also wish to take this opportunity to congratulate the Flying Fijians for their stirring victory over Scotland. It was a proud moment for our nation and a reminder of what we can achieve when we believe in ourselves.

I further extend my warmest congratulations to the newly installed *Turaga Bale na Tui Nayau, Sau ni Vanua o Lau*. It was a moment of great cultural significance and one that reinforces the strength and continuity of our *vanua*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with this Budget, we move forward with a vision and the shared determination to serve every corner of Fiji. I commend the Budget in this august House.

HON. I. TUIWAILEVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; at the outset of my response to the 2025-2026 National Budget, I wish to acknowledge the significant moment in our nation's journey – the installation of the *Turaga Bale na Tui Nayau, Sau ni Vanua o Lau*. This historic occasion is a clear testament of the Coalition Government's unwavering commitment to restoring and uplifting the traditional *vanua* leadership, a voice that was silenced and suppressed under the previous administration. We are witnessing a new chapter. We are aware of the dignity, identity and wisdom of our traditional institutions and once again, being recognised and celebrated in the national development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also rise today to pay tribute to the late Vatimi Rayalu, whose untiring dedication and deep passion for our farmers and rural communities left a lasting legacy. His hard work and vision are reflected in the increased budgetary allocation to the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways. He was a true servant of the land and its people. Rest well, Mr. Rayalu.

I also acknowledge and congratulate honourable Inosi Kuridrani for his appointment to Parliament today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me begin by commending the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance for delivering a well-considered Budget that prioritises our cultural heritage. The concept of *sautu* drives the work of Fiji's cultural sector, ensuring the effective application and appropriate use of culture, heritage and arts for sustainable Fiji. It is through our traditional system, cultural practice, artistic ingenuity, heritage legacy, and the celebration and continued use of *Vosa Vakaviti*, we will achieve truly sustainable development, including collective peace and harmonisation of life.

Before the Coalition Government took office, the cultural sector had been sidelined, receiving minimal assistance. However, I am pleased to report that the budget for the culture sector has increased significantly to \$8.6 million for the 2025-2026 financial year. That represents an increase of \$800,000 or 10.3 percent from the previous year, which was \$7.8 million, demonstrating this Coalition Government's commitment in rejuvenating and prioritising our cultural heritage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to highlight some key allocations and initiatives:

- (1) Grant to cultural institutions for implementing national mandates and community-level work - 29 percent of the budget or approximately \$2.5 million.
- (2) Special expenditures and programmes to strengthen policy and strategic priorities - 25 percent or about \$2.15 million.
- (3) Capital works investment - 34 percent or roughly \$2.93 million.
- (4) Fiji's preparation to host the Melanesian Festival of Arts and Culture in 2026 - \$1 million.
- (5) Support the implementation of the Fiji National Cultural Policy - \$225,000.
- (6) Rehabilitation of Levuka World Heritage structures - \$978,260.
- (7) Refurbishment of St. Steven's Building for the National Art Gallery will receive \$1.1 million.
- (8) Upgrade of the Fiji Museum - \$489,130.
- (9) National Trust of Fiji for the rehabilitation of national heritage sites - \$293,478.
- (10) Developing the draft Fiji Cultural Industries Strategy - \$33,750.
- (11) Cultural Statistics Framework is allocated \$56,496.
- (12) Culture and Education Strategy is allocated \$78,261.
- (13) National Culture, Heritage and Arts Awards will receive \$66,522.
- (14) Review of cultural legislations and regulations - \$97,826 .

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those allocations will enable us to make significant strides in preserving and promoting our cultural heritage. We will develop strategies for cultural industries and education, implement a cultural statistics framework and review and update our cultural legislation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to highlight some of our achievements and ongoing initiatives. We have passed the Fiji World Heritage Act 2024 to protect our cultural and natural heritage sites. Efforts are underway to revamp the Fiji Heritage Foundation, expanding support for the culture sector.

Consultations are being conducted on various policies and frameworks, including the Fiji World Heritage Policy and the Fiji Intangible Cultural Heritage Framework. Engagement with the Ministry of Tourism has prioritised culture in the Fiji National Sustainable Tourism Framework. A national taskforce has been established for organising the Melanesian Arts and Culture Festival 2026. Additionally, \$100,000 is allocated towards the 160th Commemoration of the arrival of Melanesian Indentured Labourers to Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the culture sector's budget represents only 1 percent of the total Government Budget, it is a significant step forward. We recognise that more investment is needed to achieve substantial growth and maximize returns. This Government is committed to fostering the culture sector as a vital industry for national development and growth.

We are aware of challenges such as the influx of competitive cultural products and the potential threats posed by artificial intelligence to our authentic cultural expressions. We are working to address these issues through initiatives like the proposed Traditional Knowledge and Expressions of Culture Bill.

The National Culture Sector Strategic Development Plan will ensure a coordinated effort by all our cultural institutions, leading to coherent, streamlined and impactful activities that meet the aspirations of our people.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to emphasise some additional points. The Creative Support Scheme, which is a \$50,000 allocation, has already reached out to 10 artists and cultural groups. Sir, 40 percent of those receiving assistance are women cultural practitioners, while 80 percent of the total assistance went to musicians and performing arts groups. This demonstrates our commitment to gender equality and supporting diverse artistic expressions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to report the significant progress in our education initiatives. The Department of Culture has developed the first ever draft of Fiji Culture and Education Strategy. This Strategy will integrate culture, heritage and arts in our education curriculum.

We appreciate the Ministry of Education's support through the 2023 Denarau Declaration, which focused on weaving indigenous values and knowledge into our learning experience. This includes promoting vernacular language in schools.

Importantly, the Matua and TVET Programmes will provide an alternative pathway for students, focusing on performing arts, visual arts and heritage arts. These programmes offer industry-relevant skills and clear career paths. Additionally, our strategy will introduce cultural practitioners as adjunct fellows in schools. This will ensure the transmission of our ancestral knowledge and traditions to future generations. These initiatives represent our commitment to preserving and promoting Fijian culture through education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through increased budgetary allocation and the initiatives I have outlined today, we are laying the groundwork for a vibrant, sustainable and economically significant culture sector. We believe that by investing in our cultural heritage, we are investing in the very essence of who we are as Fijians, and paving the way for a prosperous future that is deeply rooted in our traditions and values.

Noting that we can only achieve '*sautu*' with a balance scale approach to cultural development and economic growth while opting for global trends and benchmarks, it is pivotal that we embrace our indigenous epistemologies and systems that work well with us. Mr. Speaker, Sir, culture provides the underpinning to this approach and can respond to alleviating, at least, most of the many issues we continue to face at community, society and national level.

The drafting of the first-ever Fiji Cultural Statistical Framework is underway. This Framework will ensure a coherent data collection mechanism to measure the production, consumption and impact of culture. This is crucial for making informed decisions and providing support where it is most needed. We believe that culture is a billion-dollar industry for most developed countries, and Fiji has the potential to follow suit.

We are progressing with the development and implementation of a draft Fiji Cultural Industries Strategy, building on a situational analysis report undertaken by the Pacific Community. This Strategy will help us capitalise on the economic potential of our culture sector and create more opportunities for our artists and cultural practitioners.

The Department of Culture's engagement in regional forums has been strengthened, with the Director appointed to Chair the SPC Pacific Regional Culture Strategy Working Group. This appointment reflects Fiji's leadership role in cultural development in the Pacific.

For the upcoming Melanesian Arts and Culture Festival in 2026, we have appointed Ms. Letila Mitchell as our MACFEST Festival Director and Mr. Simione Sevudredre to assist with cultural programming and organising. Their expertise and experience will be invaluable in ensuring the success of this important regional event.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to reiterate that culture is not an afterthought in our national priorities. This Coalition Government is working to change the mindset and foster the culture sector as an industry to reckon with when it comes to national development and growth.

We are committed to addressing challenges such as the influx of inauthentic factory-generated cultural products that compete with our authentic and skilful work of art. We are also mindful of the

potential threats posed by the artificial intelligence to our cultural works and are taking steps to protect our knowledge systems and cultural expressions.

While we applaud the progress made in the preservation of our cultural heritage, at the same time we also note the challenges we face in the infringements and violation of our intangible cultural heritage through the production of plastic *tanoa* and the use of *masi* design and motifs in the carpet and other furniture that are on sale in various supermarkets. We denounce the commercial exploitation of these intangible cultural heritage. In this connection, we are seeking legal advice through the Solicitor-General's Office.

Mr. Speaker, in conclusion, I stand in full support of the 2025-2026 budget allocated to the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs that funds the culture sector. This budget reflects our Government's dedication to preserving and promoting our rich cultural heritage fundamental to our national identity and development. It ensures that the values, traditions and creativity that define us as a nation will continue to thrive and contribute to our collective prosperity. We look forward to the continued support of this august House as we work towards preserving, promoting and leveraging our rich cultural heritage for the benefits of all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for this opportunity. I urge all honourable Members to support this Budget as our united efforts will harness the power of our cultural heritage to build a stronger and more vibrant Fiji.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and fellow Fijians; allow me, Sir, to welcome and congratulate my kinsman from Nadroga-Navosa, honourable Kuridrani, into the House. We have worked with him in the past and he has made huge contributions in this august House.

Mr. Speaker, I am in full support of the 2025-2026 National Budget, a budget that reinforces our journey towards a stronger, more resilient and more inclusive Fiji. This is a Budget that puts our people first and sets the tone for transformational investment across key sectors, especially in tourism and civil aviation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this point, let me acknowledge the wise, steady and visionary leadership of the honourable Prime Minister. The honourable Prime Minister's vision to elevate the Pacific as an Ocean of Peace, is a mark of true statesmanship. As the people of the Pacific, our intrinsic values and culture are grounded in the profound understanding of peace. We are not a passive people, but rather, we recognise that peace and cooperation are powerful enablers of progress in Oceania.

The notion of an "Ocean of Peace" binds us together through a shared commitment to mutual respect, sustainable development and collective resilience. It does not weaken regionalism, it strengthens it. In this current era of geopolitical tensions, global uncertainties and where the foundations of multilateralism are being challenged, the Pacific, especially Fiji, offers the Ocean of Peace as a compass for a safe, welcoming, and peaceful tourism destination where visitors not only find beauty, but serenity.

In a troubled world as we have today, investors are looking for safe havens, and countries such as Fiji, under the umbrella of the Ocean of Peace, will do well in attracting capital, which we need to grow our tourism sector.

Security, stability and prosperity are not just the themes of this Budget, they are our shared vision for Fiji. As the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance stated, the 2025-2026 Budget is anchored on three pillars:

- (1) Trust - earned through transparency and policies grounded in reality.
- (2) Democracy - strengthened through resilient institutions.
- (3) Equality - ensuring every Fijian, regardless of background, is valued equally.

These principles require time and commitment, and we embrace this responsibility with resolve.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Governments has delivered to the best of its ability each year, learning from both milestones and missteps. Constructive criticism has shaped our priorities. Where we have fallen short, we are committed to do better.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation has its specific allocation, this budget supports the entire travel and tourism ecosystem. Investment in national infrastructure is also investment in tourism. When agriculture improves, tourism benefits. When health services grow stronger, so does our destination image.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's economy grew by 7.5 percent in 2023 and 4 percent in 2024, largely due to the strength of tourism, its cross-sectorial impact, and improved business confidence. This success did not come easily. The industry faced global instability, reputational risks, and external shocks. Yet, it remained resilient and responsive. I thank everyone in the tourism and aviation sectors, your resilience is reflected in our numbers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the global stage, the World Travel and Tourism Council forecasts a record-breaking \$2.1 trillion in international visa spending this year, which translates to \$11.7 trillion to global GDP. Tourism's significance to Fiji's economy is well-known. The sector is estimated to contribute up to 40 percent of our national GDP.

At the heart of this contribution is aviation, the very infrastructure that connects our islands to the world. According to the International Air Transport Association (IATA), over 97 percent of international visitors to Fiji arrive by air.

The IATA's 2024 report further highlights that the total economic impact of aviation extends well beyond direct airline revenues - spanning employment, supply chains, and destination services. From IATA's point of view, every dollar spent on air transport generates two to three times more in indirect economic value. Applying this in multiplier effect to Fiji's aviation-driven tourism sector, the aviation ecosystem underpins a significant share of national economic activity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, looking ahead, tourism is projected to reach \$16.5 trillion by 2035, or 11.5 percent share of global GDP. This tells us, Fiji is competing in a dynamic and high growth environment, and significantly for Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that indigenous tourism is set to grow over the next decade, injecting some \$67 billion into the global economy. This sector is empowering communities, like Fiji, to take control of their economic futures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, last year, Fiji welcomed over one million visitors, setting a national record and injecting billions into the economy. In the first five months of this year alone, we have received 350,000 visitors, and we remain on track despite global challenges.

An overview, Mr. Speaker, on the geographical distribution of tourism:

- Denarau sees 22 percent of arrivals;
- Coral Coast, 21 percent;
- Nadi, 17 percent;
- Suva-Tailevu, 13 percent;



- Mamanuca Islands, 10 percent; and
- Yasawas, 4 percent.

But less visited regions, like Vanua Levu, receive less than 4 percent of visitor-days. This is where our growth focus is next. Our goal is \$4 billion in tourism earnings with 1.25 million visitors by 2027.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these million visitors and billions in receipts are largely centred in two Provinces only, namely, Ba and Nadroga/Navosa. We must and we will grow tourism throughout the 14 Provinces in the Fijian archipelago.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am especially proud of the \$30 million allocation for the Na Vualiku Programme for Vanua Levu, funded in partnership with the World Bank. In line with a core theme of the National Budget, the project places strong emphasis on infrastructure as a driver of sustainable growth. This initiative is not just an investment in the infrastructure, it is an investment in equity. For too long, tourism development has been concentrated on Viti Levu, and that must change.

With the Integrated Tourism Master Plan for Vanua Levu set to commence shortly, providing a strategic blueprint for future investment in the Northern Division, this year's funding will support the design phase for key upgrades. In addition, we will launch a Na Vualiku Pilot MSME Programme this calendar year, offering cost-shared business development services, small grants to community-based tourism groups, and targeted support for women, cultural enterprises and operators to enhance market readiness and resilience.

We are unlocking the Northern Division's tourism potential and ensuring that its people participate meaningfully in the industry's growth. To the people of Vanua Levu, we see you, we believe in you, and we are building with you, for you.

The World Bank model, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will be explored and to be emulated for other regions in Fiji. In the next few months, we will be doing a scoping tour of the Lau Group with development partners. The late honourable Rayalu and I were working on this tour. Like everyone else, I miss late honourable Rayalu.

For now, in the tourism heartland, tourism investment is growing. There are 177 active projects, valued at \$5.8 billion, with many expanding towards room inventory.

On the aviation front, Fiji Airways flies to 25 destinations, carrying over 2 million passengers – a testament to national progress. At this point, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the contributions of Andre Viljoen, the outgoing CEO of Fiji Airways, and Brent Hill, the outgoing CEO of Tourism Fiji. Their leadership has played a pivotal role in these achievements. I am sure we all know that recently, Fiji Airways has been named one of the top 10 international airlines in the world by Travel and Leisure in their prestigious 2025 World's Best Awards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a welcome initiative in this Budget is the 25 percent investment allowance for capital investment in tour and sightseeing operations. While incentives for accommodation remain vital, we must also diversify our tourism products. New experiences mean more spending, deeper engagement, and stronger local economies. Mr. Speaker, Sir, coming to the Ministry, the allocation of \$93 million to the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation in the new financial year, is historic. It is more than a fiscal provision - it is a strategic declaration of intent, a recognition of the sector's role in driving recovery, development, and dignity for our people.

An allocation of \$48 million to Tourism Fiji will fuel global marketing efforts and expand our reach across digital, experiential and emerging markets. We have seen the power of our message. Our slogan is, “Fiji, where happiness comes naturally”. We have seen this in Times Square, New York; Sydney, Beijing and across Europe, but we must not be complacent. Marketing is not optional. It is the engine of demand.

This allocation is not just about branding, it is about people. It means continued income for the resort worker in the Yasawas, the homestay owner in Nacula, the diving guide in Beqa and the cultural artisan in Levuka. It is about hope, jobs and sustainable livelihoods.

Our work is guided by the Fiji Sustainable Tourism Framework 2024-2034 – our blueprint for a greener, fairer and more inclusive tourism industry. We may not see it as a specific line item, but its influence permeates every initiative –

- We have begun consultation on a new tourism legislation for Fiji, one that recognises and is conducive to not just hotels, but to the diversity of the industry. Having set the policy framework, in the new financial year, we will work on the legislation.
- We are expanding community-based tourism, where locals are not just participants but stakeholders. In the current financial year, we coordinate training with MSMEs, from business and financial literacy, to the art and skill of tour guides. We will continue this.
- We are growing wellness, cultural, and adventure tourism niches that reflect global trends and local identity. We successfully hosted sports tourism events, such as Spartan and Fiji Pro surf, and will continue to target key international events.
- We are promoting sectoral linkages with other sectors. In the current financial year, we successfully championed the Farm to Fork initiative to strengthen synergy between our chefs, hoteliers, farmers and fisher-folk. The Ministry will continue to pursue policies and programmes within our allocation to ensure stronger synergy along the tourism value chain.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this financial year, a Pilot Tourism Micro and Small Enterprise Fund was dedicated to providing access to finance for MSMEs. This programme will continue in the new financial year. I am pleased to share that so far, we have assisted 17 tourism businesses from across Fiji. We are looking at businesses in communities who want to develop their waterfall as an attraction, businesses creating local art that goes onto the walls of our hotels, businesses performing traditional *meke* for cruise visitors and businesses providing homestays in the highlands.

Please, allow me to read the sentiments of one of the businesses we assisted, and I quote:

“I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to the Ministry of Tourism for their support and commitment to promoting sustainable development in the outer islands. Your team’s dedication to go the extra mile by visiting businesses in areas, such as Taveuni, is both commendable and deeply appreciated.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, tourism is no longer just about numbers, it is about value and impact.

On civil aviation, for a nation of over 300 islands and a small spec in the vast Pacific, aviation is more than just transport - it is the heartbeat that connects families, fuels commerce, supports healthcare and powers education. In line with our commitment to expanding air connectivity to underserved locations within Fiji, the Coalition Government will undertake a feasibility study on the proposed development of a new airport in the Yasawas. We are anticipating its potential to boost tourism. Yasawa is iconic with huge interest from major players.

In tandem with this legislative review, I am pleased to announce that we are developing Fiji's first-ever Civil Aviation Master Plan - a strategic blueprint that will guide the development of aviation infrastructure, services and connectivity over a period of time. This landmark initiative will ensure that civil aviation continues to serve as a vital enabler of national development, tourism and regional integration.

We have also commenced a comprehensive review of the Civil Aviation Act 1976 to be completed in the new financial year. This review aims to align our regulatory framework with international best practices, enhance aviation safety and security, and support the growth of both, domestic and international air services.

The Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji (CAAF) is at the forefront of ensuring our skies remain among the safest and most reliable in the region. A \$6.8 million allocation to CAAF will strengthen regulatory oversight, safety compliance and international airworthiness standards. Building on impressive achievements, like modernising air traffic management and earning global safety approvals, this funding will ensure that Fiji continues to soar as a trusted hub for safe and seamless air travel in Fiji and the World.

In parallel, a total of \$2.1 million has been provided to support domestic air travel subsidies to airlines operating uneconomical routes, ensuring the continued provision of essential services to remote and maritime communities from Kadavu and Lau to Rotuma and Lomaiviti. These routes often face commercial viability challenges due to low passenger volumes and high operating costs. By subsidising these services, the Government is ensuring that residents in these islands retain vital air links for accessing healthcare, education, government services and economic opportunities. These interventions reflect a clear commitment to geographic equity and inclusive national development, ensuring that no Fijian is left behind.

Fiji's leadership in regional aviation was reaffirmed with the establishment of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Pacific Liaison Office in Nadi, made possible through Government's commitment and support, including a \$250,000 provision within the total funding allocated to CAAF. This Office strengthens technical cooperation between ICAO and Pacific Island nations, positioning Fiji at the centre of regional aviation diplomacy. It serves as a strategic hub for collaboration, oversight, and the advancement of shared long-term vision for safe and sustainable aviation across the Pacific.

Mr. Speaker Sir, this \$93 million allocation is not just a budgetary line. It is a bold endorsement of tourism and aviation as engines of economic resilience. It means a -

- small family-run business thrives on weekend bookings.
- young Fijian discovers a career in hospitality.
- village receives more visitors, more income, and more pride.

That is what good governance looks like, when national policy drives transformation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, the 2025-2026 National Budget is a reaffirmation of the Coalition Government's commitment to build a Fiji that is more just, more sustainable, and more united. I thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics for his strategic and people-first approach. I also thank our stakeholders across the tourism and aviation sectors, who walk alongside us in this journey of renewal. Let us continue to build a future where every Fijian, no matter where they live, shares in the prosperity of a thriving, connected, peaceful and confident nation.

*Vinaka vakalevu.* God bless you all and may God bless our beloved Fiji.

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and fellow citizens; I rise in this august Parliament to echo the sentiments and to support the 2025-2026 Budget.

I extend my sincere honour to the honourable Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics for presenting a National Budget that is both prudent and progressive. The theme: 'Building Security, Stability and Prosperity' reflects a deep understanding of our national priorities and a long term commitment of the Coalition Government. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am confident that this Budget is going to help lower cost of living is farmers and the rural communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister and Members of Parliament, and to fellow Fijians, I extend to you all, on behalf of the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways, our deep gratitude for your prayers and support during our most difficult time of sadness and uncertainty in the unexpected loss of our late honourable Vatimi Rayalu. We have lost a visionary leader, a father, a mentor and a role model. He had left behind clear paths and guidelines and a very young and strong team of talented individuals with hearts that are dedicated to carry out their responsibilities with respect and dignity. We will be stronger.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways is dedicated to enhancing the sector by providing robust support to farmers, developing our export markets and ensuring the protection of our environment and our flora and fauna from potential pest and diseases. By collaborating with various stakeholders, we aim to boost agricultural production, facilitate trade, uphold biosecurity measures and strengthen Fiji's food security. In pursuit of our goals, the Ministry has set aside to achieve a total export value of \$1 billion in agriculture for fresh and frozen produce over the next five years.

Crops Research, the Research Division is committed to embracing innovative practices that promote increased productivity, competitiveness and environmental sustainability. We are investing significantly in research and development to improve agricultural production and building our economy.

Food Systems and Crop Diversification, as part of our initiative to enhance food systems, we have launched a programme designed to assist sugarcane farmers that are interested in re-purposing their land for alternative crops. We are allocating a budget of \$168,750 to support those farmers in cultivating supplementary cash crops including vegetables, pulses and rice and to help diversify the income sources.

Biological Control Initiatives, recognizing the heavy reliance of synthetic pesticides by many farmers to manage pests and diseases which can pose risks to human health, soil quality and biodiversity, we are undertaking a Biological Control Initiative. This initiative emphasizes the adoption of sustainable pests and weed management methods, and to facilitate the transition towards safer and environmentally friendly farming practice. We have allocated \$97,800 for this project.

Biosecurity Efforts, our frontline biosecurity officers are instrumental in safeguarding Fiji from harmful pests and diseases that can endanger our unique bio-diversity, our primary production, economic activities, global trade and public health. We are proud to announce an additional grant of \$2.2 million to support initiatives such as control and surveillance, termite projects, the acquisition of x-ray machines and enhanced Plant Pests Incursion Response and Management Programmes.

Mobile Soil Laboratories, to enhance agricultural productivity, farmers are encouraged to utilize soil sampling and testing services provided by the Ministry of Agriculture in Koronivia, as well as through mobile soil laboratories serving the Western and the Northern Divisions. These mobile laboratories play a vital role in delivering essential support directly to farmers, and the Ministry has allocated \$168,750 to fund this initiative.

Vapour Heat Treatment, Fiji currently exports *papaya*, eggplant and mangoes, all of which are susceptible to fruit flies. High Temperature Forced Air (HTFA) treatment is used to meet export standards. To strengthen this critical process, a budget of \$112,500 has been allocated to develop Vapour Heat Treatment as an additional disinfection method.

Kava Dieback Research, the Ministry is committed to revitalizing and strengthening the resilience of *yaqona* by introducing 13 noble *yaqona* varieties across diverse agro-ecological zones in Fiji. Key initiatives include evaluating varietal performance, ensuring the supply of clean planting materials, and developing post-harvesting practices to boost domestic and export market potential pathways.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$782,600 is allocated to support scientific research and innovation. The programme also prioritizes pest and disease management, including \$400,000 dedicated to combating Kava Dieback Disease and other threats to *yaqona* production through awareness and technical support to farmers.

Land Resources Planning and Development, despite its role in providing sustenance for families, our soil also serves as a significant source of income through major exports both today and in the years to come.

Sustainable Land Management (SLM) initiative has been allocated \$800,000 to support the SLM practices across all farming communities, thereby ensuring long-term productivity, soil health and environmental preservation. The Ministry intends to promote methods such as crop rotation, organic composting and efficient water usage.

Ovalau Agri-Voltaic Project, amongst all our new initiatives, the Ministry will extend support to the FDB Green Climate Fund project, which involves civil works valued at \$1.4 million. This solar power generation and agriculture project is anticipated crop yield over 100,000 tonnes annually, providing sustenance, employment and income resilience of the Bureta and 27 communities on Ovalau.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an allocation of \$6.9 million has been designated for the Committee for the Better Utilisation of Land (CBUL). This allocation provides subsidies to landowners to encourage the leasing of their land for agricultural purposes. The Ministry will conduct a thorough evaluation and review of the current recipients to ensure transparency, accountability and effective use of resources.

School Garden and School Farms, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in line with our ongoing commitment to reducing imports and minimising expenditures, one of our new initiatives will ensure that schools cultivate their own food through back-yard farms for consumption, educational purposes and income generation. Food waste will be redirected to school farms for feed and manure, and a budget of \$97,000 is allocated to these educational institutions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Climate-Smart Agriculture Programme is a pathway towards food security and is built on three pillars and these are:

- (1) increased productivity and income;
- (2) enhancing resilience of livelihoods and ecosystems; and
- (3) reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

The Ministry has allocated a budget of \$287,500 for this initiative.

Major economic commodities that support economic growth, Mr. Speaker, Sir, agriculture commodities not only generate income through domestic trade and international exports, but also derive employment, infrastructure development and food security. By strengthening rural economies and

integrating local producers into global markets, agricultural commodities serve as a backbone of national economic resilience and long-term development.

*Yaqona*, the kava investment in Fiji has grown due to the strong economic returns. In 2024, Fiji exported 730 metric tonnes of kava, earning \$53 million, the highest export value recorded in the last 12 years, breaking the \$50 million threshold. The Coalition Government has allocated a budget of \$1.7 million to the Yaqona Farming Programme. This investment will revolutionise *yaqona* production and processing practises, guaranteeing compliance with strict international trade regulations and standards, including those set by the USA (FDA).

For taro, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2024, Fiji achieved a 12-year high with 5,540 tonnes of taro exported at a value of \$41.3 million, a 3.6 percent increase. To sustain this growth, we have allocated a budget of \$978,000, a 96 percent increase to support our *dalo* farmers under the Dalo Farming Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2024, Fiji exported \$25.2 million worth of turmeric, making a 1.6 percent increase in the highest earnings in the last 12 years. We have allocated a total budget of \$394,000 under our Spices Farming Programme specifically to scale up turmeric production in Fiji.

The Ministry recognises the critical issue in ginger production, particularly in securing planting material and farming inputs. To boost exports and support farmers and exporters, we are investing \$0.9 million in the Ginger Farming Programme, a 29 percent increase from the previous fiscal year and this will help maintain the upward export trend.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government recognises the economic significance of cocoa and coffee in Fiji and their untapped potential. We are allocating a budget of \$168,750 for the Cocoa Farming Programme to establish and expand existing cocoa and coffee farms in Fiji.

On e-agriculture, the agriculture strategy represents a forward-thinking approach for the Ministry, focussing on the digitization of certain manual processes. This strategy aims to create a supportive and user-friendly platform for farmers who have limited access to internet connectivity while also enhancing existing online platforms to function across various divisions. A total of \$112,500 has been allocated for the implementation of this new programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the \$3 million funding allocation is primarily directed towards enhancing Fiji's agriculture sector, with \$2.5 million dedicated to Commercial Agriculture Development Programme to bolster exporters and agro-processors. An additional \$112,500 to support the Agri-Tourism Programme, focussing on upgrading post-harvesting and storage infrastructure for hotel suppliers and expanding protected agriculture systems to improve consistency and quality.

Additionally, \$112,500 is designated for the Agriculture Commodity Value Added Producer Programme to expand existing agriculture MSMEs at strategic geographical locations, creating vital market outlets for our farmers. A total budget of \$112,500 has also been allocated for Agriculture Marketing Scoping and \$225,000 in AgTrade for other trade facilitation activities. This comprehensive programme is crafted to prioritise and effectively eliminate bottlenecks in the supply chain within this budget framework.

Animal Health and Production, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government's funding boost for livestock programme is set to revolutionise Fiji's industry by promoting a Commercial Intensive Livestock System, reducing imports, supporting tourism demand, and positioning the nation for other markets. The livestock sub-sector is receiving targeted and comprehensive budget support for rural farmers, including \$100,000 for the Piggery Extension Programme to improve rural and maritime piggery

infrastructure, and \$365,000 for Poultry Extension Programme to supply day-old chicks, feeds and infrastructure.

The Sheep Extension Research Programme is allocated \$748,100 to enhance farm development, genetic nutrition and farmer training.

A significant investment of \$2.3 million and \$3.9 million are dedicated to Beef and Dairy Industries respectively, marking a bold advancement of the sector overall.

Eradication of Brucellosis and Tuberculosis, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is making significant progress in its ongoing effort to eradicate brucellosis and tuberculosis, two major zoonotic diseases impacting Fiji's cattle population, by allocating \$1.46 million for their control and management. In addition, \$1.5 million is being invested to continue the tuberculosis and brucellosis work, reinforcing the commitment for livestock health and agricultural safety.

Animal Waste Management Programme tackles the risk of animal waste disposal to both environment and public health, a \$112,500 has been made under the Animal Waste Management Programme to support farmers. This initiative provides home biogas digesters, encouraging sustainable waste practises that benefit farmers by safeguarding the environment.

Stray Animal Campaign, the Ministry in response to numerous complaints regarding stray livestock including cattle, horses, goats and sheep, stray animals have been causing intensive losses and damage to all crops, including sugarcane. They had been the cause of some traffic disruptions and increased vehicle incident risks. A sum of \$596,200 has been allocated for a targeted Stray Animal Campaign.

Stray Dogs, the Ministry is also tackling the growing issue of stray dogs nationwide. Development and Growth of both Sheep and Goat Industries have been restricted from losses due to dog attacks, worms, nutrition, high input costs and management practises. To address this issue, the Ministry has allocated \$337,500 and will work with Animal Welfare Organisations to enhance its dog control and de-sexing activities throughout the community outreach programmes.

Sustainable waterways play a vital role in reducing flood risks, improving agricultural productivity and tackling climate change. To support this, the Ministry is actively investing in nature-based seawalls, river dredging, riverbank protection and coordinated watershed management to build environment and economic resilience. The Waterways Division carries out disaster risk reduction intensive through major capital projects, focused on long-term mitigation.

Drainage for Non-Municipal markets, the Government has allocated \$3.5 million for the Maintenance of Drainage System for Non-Municipal Areas Programme. Additionally, \$1.1 million has been allocated for the 2025 and 2026 programme.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this budget supports the 10-year Non-Sugar Agriculture Sector Policy, National Development Plan and Sustainable Development Goals. I urge all the honourable Members of Parliament to join me in supporting the 2025-2026 National Budget.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, fellow citizens. It is with a profound sense of duty and optimism that I rise in support of the 2025-2026 National Budget, a budget that embodies a collective aspiration for building security, stability and prosperity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2025-2026 Budget is a practical and a deeply measured national response to an extraordinary global environment in which we find ourselves as a small island state. It is a testament to our resilience, a commitment to our people, and our unwavering belief in a better future. This Budget essentially builds upon the trust established in our previous two Budgets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the policies in the 2025-2026 National Budget are directly shaped through our extensive consultations. Our people's perspectives have fundamentally guided our 2025-2026 commitment. We consulted the people and we listened using the bottom-up approach of consultation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are investing in our people through skill development. We are ensuring that our civil servants are better paid. We are increasing support under our Social Protection Schemes. We are investing into major infrastructure upgrades to rescue our public assets that have been left to deteriorate over the years. This is not just about rebuilding structures, it is about restoring dignity, reliability and opportunity in every corner of our country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are working on economic diversification to cushion future economic shocks. We are investing in strengthening our independent State institutions to ensure a better functioning of our democracy. We are investing in our Police Force to ensure that law and order is maintained.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ease the burden of rising global prices on our people, we have reduced VAT from 15 percent to 12.5 percent, effective from 1<sup>st</sup> August, 2025. This is alongside the continued zero-rated VAT on 22 essential items, providing a total of \$500 million VAT relief to our people. We have provided an elaborate Social Welfare Programme in this Budget to alleviate the cost of living.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on fiscal sustainability, this is a Budget which starts the path to sustainable and resilient growth. It addresses key social economic challenges, promotes inclusive development and builds stronger economic and fiscal safeguards to enhance our capacity to withstand future global shocks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Assistant Minister for Finance, I am proud to reaffirm this Government's unwavering commitment to fiscal sustainability through the 2025-2026 National Budget. While we project a fiscal deficit of 6 percent of GDP, this is a carefully calibrated response in response to current economic and social pressures designed to provide targeted support to families, protect essential services and drive infrastructure growth.

May I speak in the vernacular. *E dina ni navuci me na 6 na pasede na deficit se na kena sivia na i lavo ena vakayagataki me veidutaitaki vata na i lavo e rawa, e caka vakamatau ogo me veiganiti vinaka kei na draki ni bula vakailavo e Viti kei na veika e yaco tiko mai vuravura kei na bula nuiqawaqawa eda sotava tale tikoga na lewenivanua e Viti kei vuravura. E caka me na maroroi keda kece na lewenivanua kei na vei matavuvale kece e Viti, maroroi na gacagaca kece ni vei qaravi vei kemuni na lewenivanua, ka tomani tikoga na veivakatorocaketaki lelevu ena noda vanua.*

When the Coalition Government took office, we inherited unsubstantiated debt of over 90 percent of GDP. Through prudent fiscal management and the decisive revenue reforms over the past two and a half years, we have managed to reduce the debt level to 79.8 percent of GDP. That is 10 percent lower than what we inherited in 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget adopts an expansionary fiscal approach. It is a bold but a necessary decision to protect our people, strengthen economic resilience and continue to invest in critical infrastructure and productive capacity that will drive our long-term growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is also a counter-cyclical fiscal response to the ongoing global headwinds and uncertainties. As I have said before, it is carefully crafted to cushion the economy; provide



targeted relief to the low-income and vulnerable households; improve the quality, accessibility and delivery of public services; and address emerging socio-economic challenges, including rising drug abuse and HIV infection.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, higher deficit and increased Government expenditure to counter the impact of global headwinds is only possible as we undertook tough but strategic choices in the last two Budgets which has created fiscal space, allowing us to respond to global pressures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have maintained our actual fiscal deficit at an average of 3 percent. It is only through this careful and responsible fiscal management that we can rebuild fiscal space, enabling us to respond proactively to the global shocks through increased expenditures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on monetary policy, the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) continues to adopt an accommodative monetary policy to support Government's expansionary fiscal policy and support growth. The RBF has maintained its policy rate at 0.25 percent consistently. Lending rates are attractive, and it is no better time than now for our private sector to expand their investments domestically to boost productive capacity.

As of 10th July, 2025, foreign reserves stood at \$3.790 million, equivalent to 5.9 months of retained imports. Mr. Speaker, Sir, our average annual rate of inflation for the 12 months to June 2025, that is, comparing the average CPI for the 12 months from July 2024-2025 with the average of 12 months from July 2023 to June 2024, stands at 2.3 percent, and remains on a downward trajectory.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on economic growth, the global outlook remains subdued, weighed down by the converging challenges. This includes escalating geopolitical and trade tensions, tight monitoring policies, fragile financial markets, constraint fiscal space due to high debt levels and ongoing climate-related disruptions.

The slowdown in some of our major trading partners and tourism source markets poses downward risk to the domestic economy. However, domestically, challenges such as high cost of doing business, skills shortage, coupled with entrenched bureaucracy and institutional red tapes, are challenges the Government is committed to address to expedite the timely implementation of major investment projects in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Civil Service, in our last Budget, we delivered a major boost to the Civil Service by implementing pay increase ranging from 7 percent to as high as 20 percent. This historic adjustment injected over \$85 billion directly into the pockets of our hardworking civil servants, recognising their dedication and the rising cost of living.

In this Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, civil servants will receive a 3 percent pay rise. This means that in a period of one year, civil servants had a wages and salaries rise of between 10 to 23 percent. This is a significant rise for our civil servants. This ongoing support reflects our Government's belief in fair compensation, our respect for Public Service and our focus on building a motivated, professional and high-performing Civil Service for the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, beyond salary adjustments, this government has taken bold steps to restore dignity and stability within the Civil Service. We have restored permanent employment for many who were previously conservative or on uncertain contracts. We have also increased the retirement age, allowing our experienced public servants to continue contributing their skills and knowledge. In addition, we have made significant investments through training and capacity building to ensure our workforce is equipped to meet the demands of a modern, efficient and service-orientated public sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on social protection and social wages, this Government remains steadfast in its commitment to protecting our most vulnerable. In the 2023-2024 financial year, we increased social protection allowance by up to 15 percent to 25 percent, providing much-needed support to older persons, persons living with disabilities and those under the care and protection programmes. In this Budget, we have built on that progress with a further 5 percent increase across all core social protection allowances. These sustained increases reflect our values as a compassionate Government, one that puts people first and ensures that no Fijian is left behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of our ongoing commitment to support Fijians, in the 2025-2026 Budget, transport assistance through a 10 percent bus fare subsidy is available to all citizens. This means that everyone will pay 10 percent less of the bus fare, and this subsidy helps reduce the daily travel cost for families, workers, students and everyone who relies on public transport.

In addition to these increases, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we continue to maintain a broad range of social wage initiatives, aimed at easing the burden of vulnerable families. These include subsidised electricity, free water transport assistance, free education and various programmes designed to provide tangible support where it is needed most. Through these measures, we are not only improving livelihoods, but also promoting equality and social inclusion across Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on crime, drugs and HIV, after years of neglect and turning a blind eye on drugs, crime and HIV by the FijiFirst Government, it is the Coalition Government that has taken this head-on to address this national emergency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, safeguarding Fiji and the wellbeing of our people remains a core duty of the Coalition Government. In recent years, we have seen the alarming rise of illicit drug use, increasing criminal activity and the surge in HIV cases, largely linked to drug abuse. These challenges are interconnected and represent a significant threat to our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we acknowledge that drug trade fuels illicit money. This Budget introduces decisive action to promote financial transparency, combat tax evasion and strengthen the integrity of our economy.

Moreover, to bolster national security, the Fiji Police Force is provided with an increased funding of \$240.3 million, reflecting an increase of \$13.5 million. To strengthen law and order, the Government has approved an increase of 1,000 personnel to our Police Force, which will be implemented in two phases. In this Budget, we are allocating \$19.5 million to launch the first phase, which will see the recruitment of over 588 new officers. This is in addition to those around 300 existing vacancies, which will give us an immediate boost of over 800 officers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is confronting a worsening HIV crisis, with around 7,000 cases which, if left unchecked, could escalate to a serious health emergency. Recent statistics shows that half of the rising cases is linked to drug abuse and needle sharing, commonly referred to as the bluetoothing. In response, the Government is committing \$10 million towards HIV testing, prevention, awareness and control as part of a comprehensive and coordinated effort to address drugs, crime and public health challenges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the complex issue of drugs, crime and HIV are being addressed through a comprehensive strategy. We are enhancing Police resources by tightening border control, as well as eliminating regulatory gaps and promoting accountability. Most importantly, we are taking firm action to safeguard the safety, security and health of every Fijian.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after listening to those on the other side talking more about increased expenditures or for the Government to reduce its expenditures and reduce the deficit, the question is,

should we improve the deficit and continue to allow the worsening of drugs, crime and HIV/AIDS situation in the country which is now a national emergency?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the Public Accounts Committee, we are ensuring accountability and transparency in the management of taxpayer funds. As Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, I wholeheartedly welcome an upcoming amendment to the Audit Act, which will enhance the powers and independence of the Office of the Auditor-General. Furthermore, the allocation of \$7.5 million in this Budget to strengthen the Office of the Auditor-General demonstrates this Government's commitment to reinforcing oversight and audit capabilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the Bureau of Statistics, timely and accurate national statistics is important for informed decisions and also effective policy formulation. We are committed to strengthening the Fiji Bureau of Statistics Office towards becoming a truly independent national statistics office. As part of this effort, the review of the Statistics Act is currently underway.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on education and Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service (TSLS), the Coalition Government continues to provide significant progress towards sustainable development targets on quality education with the highest allocation of \$847 million. We are investing in school infrastructure, digital learning, teacher and school management capacity building.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget reflects our unwavering commitment to our people and our determination to build a secure, stable and prosperous Fiji. It reflects our commitment to reach every corner of our nation and respond as best as we can to the diverse realities of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is an expansionary Budget designed with foresight in anticipation of global economic headwinds.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the government, national prosperity is not just measured by GDP, it is marked by the smiles of the children, the livelihood of families and the hope in every heart.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there has been widespread support from the budget. This has come from every sector of our society and economy, and I am sure the Opposition can learn from some of those honest and sincere appreciation of the Budget throughout the country. I fully support this Budget. May God bless Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I call on the next speaker, there is an old famous saying that was often used by our Fijian teacher, Master Druavesi, back in high school to dampen the student who thinks he knows all and what is coming next. He always says, “Hold your horse, cowboy”. Hold your horse until your turn comes. So, just to remind others that your turn will come.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, do excuse my voice. The honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of this august House, and to all Fijians who are watching and listening across our beloved nation, at home, at work, and in our communities; *Dhanyevaad, vinaka vakalevu* for your time and attention.

Let me begin by paying tribute to the late honourable Rayalu. Though we often found ourselves on opposing sides in this Chamber, outside of it, we shared mutual respect and acquired camaraderie. He was a man grounded in a genuine desire to serve our people, and his absence is deeply felt.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today with a sense of duty, not to play politics, but to speak the truth – the truth that echoes across our market stalls, our health clinics, our classrooms and our living rooms. While

this Government is busy painting a glossy picture of progress, the reality outside these walls is dark. It is painful, and growing harder to ignore.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, families are feeling the pinch of the cost of living. Workers are over-burdened; meth is destroying our communities and HIV cases have tripled in less than a year. The Online Safety Commission is overwhelmed with reports of abuse, yet the digital space remains largely ungoverned. To top it off, a pound of butter now costs \$15.93. At this point, it practically becomes a luxury item. Let me break it down, honourable Members. A minimum wage worker earns \$5 an hour. That worker needs to labour for over three hours just to buy one pound of butter. What kind of economic logic is this? What kind of progress is this? It sounds like a movie plot for a futuristic film. Sadly, it is the everyday reality of our Fijians.

Then, Mr. Speaker, Sir, comes the recent Commission of Inquiry, led by a respected Australian Justice, funded by the taxpayers. Its findings have implicated key figures in positions of power, some of whom are sitting here today. It is time we look at our accountability mechanisms. Commission and Inquiries mean nothing without implementation. Recommendations must not gather dust in Cabinet drawers while public trust erodes. We must create an independent implementation tracker, publicly available, quarterly updated, showing which reforms are in action and which are not. Transparency must move from speeches to systems.

The word hope – every politician goes around and says, let us hope this happens, let us hope that happens. This word is growing harder to hold on to. Fijians are still waiting for the good change they were promised during the 2022 General Election by this Coalition Government and all they have received are good speeches and not good outcomes, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

To every family listening to me today, to those stretching every dollar, facing rising costs and diminishing services, I see you and I acknowledge your strength. Despite the odds, you carry your families and this nation forward. You are the true backbone of this nation. Mr. Speaker, Sir, now let me talk about this Budget, if we even can call that. It is not just a disappointment, it is not even a missed opportunity. It is a lazy Budget from a lazy Government. It does not just lack vision, it lacks basic effort. Where are the bold reforms? Where is the leadership? Where is the urgency we were promised?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while they parade a 2.5 percent VAT reduction like it is a gift from above, let us not forget that they were the ones who jerk it up from 9 percent to 15 percent in the first place. You do not get to set the house on fire and then expect a standing ovation for turning on the hose. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the damage has already been done.

Everyday, Fijians are paying the price of that backhand. Prices have skyrocketed across the board and this half-baked reversal does not changed the struggle that has already unfolded of the past two years. Let me be very clear again Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government created the problem and now wants praise for pretending to solve it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us talk about the Civil Servants, the ones who worked hard preparing this budget as well, the very people who keep the country running. A 3 percent pay rise? Really? That's not a rise, it is a rounding error. Mr. Speaker, Sir, quietly, many civil servants expected a 10 percent to 30 percent.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, just a Point of Order on relevance on Standing Order 60. When we debate in this House, we need to be relevant and factual. The honourable Member is choosing 3 percent when the whole of this House knows that within one year, we did 23 percent increase. So, just a word of concern, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of being relevant. Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Lal, can you agree that, that percentage has been corrected. Which means 20 percent, correct? If you do say 3 percent, you particularise only to this year, right. Because overall, it is 23 percent.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 3 percent for this year's Budget. May I continue Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, proceed, please.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, many expected a 10 percent to 30 percent pay rise in this Budget, just to keep pace with inflation, they got a 3 percent tap on the back that will likely be taxed up before it even hits their account. This is not reward Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is disrespect.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I speak truth in this chamber because someone must. Economy is flattering, not by accident but by design of this Coalition Government through policies that punish the growth and reward waste. The Government's hundred day promises have now become a thousand days disappointments. They said that they will cut wasteful spending, yet the VIP treats continue. They said they will end favouritism, but the appointments tell a different story. Same faces, same games, different chairs. Even at grog bowl around the country, people are saying out loud, I quote, "Thank God FijiFirst was in charge during COVID-19. If this lot were in charge back then, we might be in bankruptcy today." They do not like hearing this, but that is the truth and the truth stings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the national debt now stands at \$11 billion. The deficit is around \$886 million and climbing. What legacy are we writing for our children - one where they inherit bills for the cars they never rode in, the buildings they never entered? This is not a budget. It is a bill and our children are being handed that bill.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us talk about some of the more insulting ways of this Government's budget.

- (1) \$7 million to Polytech Limited, I note, seems to be a company, while University of Fiji and Fiji National University beg for basic support. Why are we neglecting our own institutions in favour of private ones.
- (2) The food allowance for rural pregnant mothers cut nearly in half from \$800,000 to \$400,000. What kind of Government cuts food for expecting mothers!
- (3) Still no Local Government elections. Half a million dollars allocated for logistics but no plan, no timeline, just delays. Democracy delayed is democracy denied as they say Mr. Speaker, Sir.
- (4) While ordinary Fijians are tightening their belt and struggling to make ends meet, this Coalition Government has found room to allocate \$1.25 million to open an embassy in Israel at a time when the Middle East is engulfed in war. Where civilian children, teachers, lives are being lost and children are dying Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government chooses to prioritise foreign diplomatic mission over the urgent needs of our own people here. Our hospitals lack medicine, our schools need resources, our elderly are left neglected in care homes, yet we are borrowing to build embassies in conflicted zones. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not strategic diplomacy, this is misplaced priorities of this Coalition Government. To the Government before flying Fiji's flag overseas, we must restore dignity and confidence back home here.

- (5) While our classrooms continue to crumble and while our students in rural and maritime areas walk the kilometres to access education, while our schools are running without basic teaching materials, the Government has seen it fit to hand over \$300,000 to Fiji Principal Association who, I believe, do not even have an office. Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us be clear, this is not a school - this is not a student, this is not a front-line learning resources, this is a body made up of salaried civil servants and now, taxpayers are putting the bill for what? Cocktails? Parties? Conferences or bureaucratic networking sessions?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a blatant example of misdirected spending. Public funds channelled to prestige instead of purpose. What will the students gain from this handout? Will it build a dormitory, fix a leaking roof, provide stationery? No, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a slap in the face of thousands of students and children who continue to be underserved by this very system. We demand accountability, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we demand clarity and above all, we demand the future Budgets put the students and not the systems at the centre of spending.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope the Government is listening. At this juncture, I am calling for three more items to be added to the VAT free list. History tells us that FijiFirst brought 21 items. This Coalition Government came, they added one more. Today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am asking for three more items to be added:

- (1) Eggs;
- (2) Butter; and
- (3) Honey.

Now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that may sound simple, but ask any mother packing lunches, any students getting by, any family trying to stretch their dollar and you will realise just how essential these items are. They are not luxuries. They are staples. They are breakfast on the table in the morning and nourishment in the most basic sense. So, let us be real, honourable Prime Minister, if we truly want to help our people, relief should not come in the form of hashtags and press releases. It should come in the supermarket aisle where every cent saved makes a difference. This is not a grand ask, it is a fair one. A Government that can fund cars for the elite can surely lift tax on a tray of eggs.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government has provided funding for the Fiji Police Force. I commend the Police and the new Ministry for their calm and steady leadership, and I thank the Police for their prompt action regarding the desecration of the Samabula Shiv Mandir, but even the best leaders need resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, few weeks ago there was a news article where it said they were intending to buy new presidential vehicles for the Chief Justice. With all due respect, is this a priority right now? Roads are crumbling, wages are stagnant, hospitals are falling apart, but the Government wants luxury vehicles. That tells everything you need to know about their priorities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is something which is very close to my heart, racism. Mr. Speaker, Sir, racism is at an all-time high in Fiji. Just scroll through official *Facebook* pages of the Prime Minister and the Minister for Fisheries, the comments are vile, offensive and deeply racist.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are often aimed at myself not because of what I say but because of who I am. This is the ugly cost of doing our jobs as an Opposition Member of Parliament but I ask this House, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what is the Government doing about this? Where is the leadership? Racism on Government platforms is not just offensive, it is dangerous. We are all protected under the 2013 Constitution, but when racism thrives on official pages, that protection starts to feel more like symbolic.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, SO 62(1), the honourable Member is referring to maybe racist comments if I am correct which are in some of the government releases. So I am saying in SO 62(1), when speaking a member must not imputed improper motives to any other members. So, what is being imputed is that whatever Government puts out and those commenting on it is caused by the Government releases and that is what you are imputing.

HON. K.K. LAL.- With your asset?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Yes, I did.

MR. SPEAKER.- The reference that is made by the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament is when speaking, a member must not impute improper motives to any other member. So, you can take it the other way. If you are not imputing improper motives to any other person, then it is not relevant - not relevant for you to raise it.

HON. K.K. LAL.- I have a recommendation at the end.

MR. SPEAKER.- What I am saying is that if in fact you are referring to a Government publication that refers or you did mean as racist comments, correct?

HON. K.K. LAL.- No, Mr Speaker, Sir. Once post are shared on the official page of the Prime Minister, the comment section at the bottom which is posted by public the ones that I have seen and read it is full of racist comments against me or basically calling me '*kaidia*' go back to India and so forth.

So, basically, Mr. Speaker, I am trying to explain in this budget that racism is an all time high in social media and there is a recommendation for the government to take into consideration for the Online Safety Commissions budget and so forth.

MR. SPEAKER.- How relevant is it to the budget?

HON. K.K. LAL.- Basically I am trying to give a background on my recommendation that I would give now.

MR. SPEAKER.- Can you then resist from the presentation to now until you get your recommendations and then refer to that particular paragraph?

HON. K.K. LAL.- I can move on from that paragraph.

MR. SPEAKER.- That is great, you do that.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr Speaker, Sir, I want to raise another Point of Order, SO 62(4)(d).

Mr. Speaker, can I just ask, honourable Usamate to have some decorum. His behaviour in interjecting is really uncalled for. I am moving a Point of Order, this man is getting crazy.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Usamate, hold your horse and take a seat. Let me listen to his Point of Order first. I do not know his Point of Order yet.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are getting crazy. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Standing Order (62)(4)(d), words that are likely to promote or provoke feelings of ill-will or hostility between communities or ethnic groups within Fiji. He comes out and says racism in this country is all time high.

Where is his evidence? On what basis he can say that?

MR. SPEAKER.- Now, honourable Usamate, what is your Point of Order?

HON. J. USAMATE.- My Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is on Standing Order 62(4)(a). It is completely unparliamentary for a Deputy Prime Minister of a country to refer to another Member of Parliament as crazy. I am not crazy; he needs to take that back. The very thing that he talked about, decorum, he needs to walk the talk and do what he talked about. I am not crazy. I have the freedom to say what I need to say.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will ask the honourable Prasad to withdraw that reference to you.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I will withdraw, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but I did say that his interjection on my Point of Order, when you raise a Point of Order, the Point of Order is to the honourable Speaker. It is unbecoming of an honourable Member to interject when another Member is moving a Point of Order to the honourable Speaker, but I withdraw that crazy reference.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my recommendation on racism, the Online Safety Commission must be resourced and empowered to take swift, visible action. Social media platforms should not become playgrounds for bigotry. We must introduce clear legislation mandating accountability on public pages held by or run by Government officials or the Government itself. If someone, Mr. Speaker, Sir, used a loudspeaker to yell racial comments in a marketplace, I am sure they will be taken to task. Why is our digital space any different? That is the recommendation that I want to give to the Government.

Moving on, Mr. Speaker, I do have another recommendation. Let me raise this concern of Fiji's nightlife economy, and this is after consulting taxi drivers and our young people. For the third year in a row, restrictive club hours are choking this sector - taxi drivers, roadside vendors, bouncers and bar staffs, service stations and other kiosks. All of them are hurting. This is not about late-night parties. It is about livelihoods these people are surviving from. Restore the previous nightclub hours, not for the sake of recreation, but for the sake of our economy or economic recovery and tourism.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this budget is full of big numbers - billions here, millions there. It reads more like a fantasy novel than a fiscal plan. Here is the catch, Mr. Speaker, Sir. A budget is only good as its implementation. You can announce \$100 million for economic growth, but if businesses are too scared to invest, too weighed down by red tape or simply too delusional by this Government's unpredictability, then it is just all ink on paper. Confidence is not built through press releases. It is built through consistency, clarity and competence. Right now, some businesses are watching and they are not buying what this Government is selling.

To the Government, I say this - this is not a speech of anger. It is a plea - a plea for vision, a plea for action, a plea for real leadership. Fiji is not just an economy. Fiji is a farmer in Bua. Fiji is a nurse in Labasa. Fiji is a student in Savusavu. Fiji is a grandmother in Nadroga, and all of them are asking who is listening to their concerns.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget reveals the true face of this Government. They promised to fix the system, but they became the very system. And let me tell you, Mr. Speaker, Fijians are watching. They see everything. They see the disconnect and they will not be fooled again.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my seat and end my speech, I will vote no to this budget, and I do so with a clear conscience. I am not voting against programmes like First Home Buyers Initiative, free education, or legal aid. These were policies that started under the leadership of Prime Minister



Bainimarama.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order! Give the speaker his space.

HON. K.K. LAL.- ... and the current Government is simply continuing them while pretending they invented them. However, I cannot support a budget that cuts food allowances for rural pregnant mothers from \$800,000 to \$420,000, or gives Polytech \$7 million instead to our local universities, allocates \$1 million to new embassies while our ordinary Fijians in Fiji are struggling.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not a people's budget, it is a political budget. Some say that it is a vote-buying budget as well, built to reward friends, cover poor decisions and spill headlines. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will vote no because I reject the direction this Government is taking our country.

I would like to respond to the honourable Minister for Climate Change, he said that we are a divided Opposition.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Yes.

HON. K.K. LAL.- At least, we are not like the Government where everyone agrees because they are too scared to disagree.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the Opposition, we debate ideas. In Government, I think they just debate who gets the next overseas trip.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the honourable Member says that we are divided, they are delusional. Frankly, I would rather say, be divided with brains than united in confusion, if not another Commission of Inquiry will be initiated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my seat, I will not sit quietly as this Government steers off course. I will not stop demanding accountability and I will not stop telling the truth, no matter how uncomfortable it makes the other side.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition honourable Members of Parliament and to the people of Fiji listening to this broadcast through *Walesi*, or live streaming or on radio today; *ni sa bula vinaka* and good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to offer my contributions and support, of course, to the 2025-2026 National Budget delivered by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister on the theme, "*Building Security, Stability and Prosperity*" on the 27th of last month. Before I do so, Mr. Speaker, I wish to pay tribute to the late Minister for Agriculture and Waterways, honourable Vaitimi Tidara Tuinasakea Kaunitawake Rayalu, a man with a deep passion and vision for Fiji's agriculture, the farmers and their future. I acknowledge his wife, Mrs. Vasiti Rayalu and the children and the role of support they had for the late Minister's work for our nation. May God's holy spirit give them comfort over this very difficult time. I also pray that the honourable Rayalu rests in peace and that his legacy casts a long shadow of positive influence as we develop agriculture into the economic powerhouse the late Minister and this side of the

House knows it can be.

On a less sombre and more uplifting note, I would also like to congratulate the *Turaga Bale na Tui Nayau, Tui Lau, Sau ni Vanua o Lau*, Ratu Tevita Lutunauga Kapaiwai Uluilakeba Mara on his successful installation last week. Might I say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this was only possible because the change this Government brought to this country.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to welcome my *turaga naita*, honourable Kuridrani, for re-entering Parliament once again.

Finally, congratulations to the Flying Fijians on a sterling victory over Scotland last Saturday.

In terms of the three budgets now tabled, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by the People's Coalition, this one is probably the best so far. Why, you ask, is this so? It is very easy. The budget is a reflection on how the People's Coalition Government, ably led by the honourable Prime Minister, has been spending the last two years and seven months, setting in place the building blocks for rebuilding Fiji. The debt-to-GDP is sound 80 percent. The GDP growth has been solid. Despite global hard winds, our economy is forecasted to grow 3.2 percent this year, with growing optimism that we will finish higher, and around 3 percent in 2026.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget addresses and confronts cost of living. At least \$800 million is allocated to cost of living issues. We have been hearing the cries of the people of Fiji, and we have answered comprehensively. We now have clear plans to address roads, sewerage, water, hospital infrastructure, and HIV, which the previous regime swept under the carpet. Drugs and security are issues that are being addressed, and education is getting a revamp.

We are heavily supporting TVET to provide manpower for the construction boom that is about to happen in the next 12 months to 36 months. The green transition in Fiji has started with new leadership at EFL, and a focus on the blue and green and cyclic economy is emerging.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, rather than promised laptops and milk for every student, as the last regime did, a road through the middle of Fiji, or looking at agricultural diversification by growing potatoes – as suggested by a senior honourable Member on the other side of the House – this Government has been strategic, methodical, pragmatic, and realistic in its approach to deal with the problems we have inherited.

Just to fact-check, honourable Ketan Lal, as I have said before, the increase over one year is 23 percent, not 3 percent. More importantly, on VAT, just to remind the honourable Members on that side of the House, VAT was 12.5 percent between 2008 and 2010. Between 2011 and 2016, it was 15 percent. From 2016, it was 9 percent, but they added 15 percent in terms of ECAL and STT. Therefore, the total cost to the people of Fiji was around 25 percent. Look in the mirror, I suggest.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are addressing the sugar industry once and for all through a Parliamentary Select Committee, chaired by the honourable Prime Minister, as announced in this Budget. We have launched the National Development Plan, we have adopted the first ever National Digital Strategy for Fiji, and have undertaken policy reforms across all Ministries, stabilised the economy, and confronted what others on the other side of the House had ignored. Make no mistake, we are by no means out of the woods yet. The heavy lifting is being done, and the benefits are starting to manifest. The foundations are being laid, and the people of Fiji are starting to see the changes. To honourable Koroilavesau, we are cleaning up the Nabukalou Creek.

The Ministry that I have been honoured to lead is allocated \$84.8 million, compared to \$106.6 million last year. This is not a reduction. The major budget line item withheld in the 2025-2026 Financial Year is a legacy rebate of \$30 million for film productions. This will be cleared from the current budgetary allocations.

Taking this into account, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the actual proposed budget for the Ministry of Trade, MSMEs and Communications has increased by \$8.2 million or 11 percent. The funding for our Ministry will allow us to continue to carry out strategic initiatives for the next year. These are:

- reconfiguring the architecture of the Fijian economy through economic diversification;
- driving the ease of doing business;
- pushing MSMEs and co-operatives;
- connecting the unconnected;
- consolidating communication and cyber security ecosystems; and
- raising standards in Fiji through enhanced legislation and regulations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the past year, one narrative stood out was that our \$5.8 billion investment pipeline was a political illusion. Critics were quick to dismiss it as inflated, exaggerated - even dubious. That is why it is especially powerful when respected, independent voices speak plainly. As Mr. Ram Bajekal a seasoned economist and Chief Executive Officer of Golden Manufacturers recently observed, and I quote: “The past \$5.8 billion investment figures seemed dubious, but I now see genuine projects underway.”

That validation tells you all you need to know. The pipeline is real. It is moving and it is delivering. I have mentioned at various times in this House that we have over 177 active projects in various stages of development from tourism, infrastructure, digital economy, manufacturing and commercial agriculture with a combined estimated value of \$5.8 million.

In the second half of this year, we expect some significant announcements in terms of a Major ICT Business Park and Fiji's newest 6-Star hotel resort and possibly two major commercial agriculture ventures. In terms of investment, this will total \$1.2 billion. Fiji is attracting diversified capital from globally recognised long term investors. One of the clearest examples is Fiji Water who is developing an 80-acre farm in Vanua Levu. We are also advancing the establishment of the Medicinal Cannabis industry and will bring forward legislation in the latter part of this year.

Working with the line ministries, the revised Kava Policy and Bill will come forward this year, ensuring that Fiji meets international standards in food safety and quality. The Mahoghany Bill is almost ready for nation-wide consultations. The *kava* and mahoghany industries are multimillion dollar industries for Fiji. This will also boost the *iTaukei* economy.

The Ministry continues to support the Outsourcing Industry, and I thank the comments of the honourable Leader of the Opposition. Over the last two years, the Coalition Government has seen the entry of five new BPOs in Fiji. The future of Outsourcing in Fiji will be in Knowledge Process Outsourcing (KPO) and the Government stands ready to support. Fiji's participation in Expo 2025 in Osaka will attract significant opportunity to provide a platform to profile our unique identity and attract investment.

In the audio-visual industry, it continues to be a high-impact economic driver and a powerful promotional tool for Fiji. In 2025 alone, Fiji welcomed 65 international productions, generating over \$77 million in our economy and creating \$126 million in new economic activity. This means real jobs for over 1,000 local crew and 51 hotel room nights across the Western Division, and a boost to tourism, transport, catering and other sectors.

In terms of trade diversification, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our ongoing engagement with the United States, for example, is constructive and forward-looking. We remain optimistic that our current discussions will pave a way for a more predictable market access and commercial opportunities for Fijian goods and services very soon. An extension has been granted to 1st August on the current 10 percent tariff.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the most significant achievements was the breakthrough on the long-standing impasse for implementing Interim Economic Partnership Agreement (IEPA) with the EU. After years of inaction, the IEPA has been successfully implemented and has enhanced relationships with the EU. The activation of global sourcing will benefit our Fijian exporters and formal activation is imminent.

At the same time, we are looking at:

- a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement with the United Arab Emirates;
- PACER plus and the MSG Agreement;
- Possibly joining APEC;
- invigorated our trade relations and economic opportunities across the Pacific, starting with Papua New Guinea and Tonga this year.

Mr. Speaker, in terms of ease of doing business, we have made significant investment in digital transformation, most notably the ease of doing business initiative. Since, September, the Starting a Business' initiative has gone live, giving investors and entrepreneurs, for the first time, access to a digital integrated platform to register and launch their businesses. That is only the beginning. The platform is now being expanded to building permits and more complex and detailed service. Its inclusion reflects our commitment to tackling tougher more time-consuming areas of Government service delivery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, by the end of this year, businessNOW Fiji would offer 25 e-services across 16 Government agencies. By 2030, our target is to bring 80 percent of key Government services online. These platforms are not just being built to digitize services but to reimagine how Government interacts with people, removing bottlenecks, reducing delays, delivering greater transparency and, of course, more effectiveness. The digitization of Government services is a priority.

Mr. Speaker, we, the Coalition Government, would like to address the ease of doing business once and for all and equip the Civil Service with automated tools to make this happen. The productivity dividends to the economy will be immense.

Mr. Speaker, in terms of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), in this financial year, the Government has allocated around \$120 million to MSMEs and in the proposed budget, we are proposing a record \$160 million, an increase of about 32 percent. In addition, my Ministry was allocated \$4 million this year and \$5.5 million in the new year, an increase of 36 percent.

Mr. Speaker, there are several key actions that we should complete as part of our delivery of MSMEs and cooperatives. We are looking at the first ever MSME Strategic Plan and the creation of a comprehensive MSME database. We are looking at a cooperative policy and the revision of the Acts.

For the first time, the Department has secured a renovation budget to renovate the College in Lami and a substantial allocation of \$10 million is dedicated to the Yasawa Tourism Marketing Cooperative. These funds will be managed by the Ministry under close oversight and supervision with the Ministry of Finance.

Mr. Speaker, MSMEs and cooperatives together represent a powerful pathway out of poverty, as alluded to by the honourable Prime Minister, empowering women, youth, individuals and communities to strengthen their livelihoods and achieve sustainable economic advancement.

Mr. Speaker, in terms of connecting the unconnected and the ecosystems - communication and cybersecurity ecosystems, let me just outline the initiatives that are being undertaken.

We have a national ID system underway. We are doing a comprehensive review on the ICT Government infrastructure which will provide a pathway for future management of the Government network. We expect to deploy Starlink connectivity to, at least, 124 villages by the end of August, subject to Government Cabinet approval.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 5G is expected to be rolled out formally. We are now in the final stages of developing Fiji's first true National Cybersecurity Strategy, again, subject to Cabinet approval, and we will review the Telecommunications Act and the Online Safety Commissions Act.

Mr. Speaker, in terms of standards and regulations and raising them, we are currently in the process of reviewing the legal framework for standards and the process is underway and we hope to actually show up the strengthening of our standards environment in the country.

Mr. Speaker, to conclude, by investing in the diversification of the Fijian economy through investment and trade, cutting red tape, driving digital transformation, empowering MSMEs and cooperatives and raising standards, we are setting a stage for sustainable development and prosperity in Fiji. These strategic initiatives will drive job creation, attract foreign investment and foster innovation across all sectors, positioning Fiji as a regional leader. Our commitment to these transformative efforts will pave the way for a resilient and thriving future for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, together, we will forge a legacy of progress and prosperity that will be felt by generations to come. On that note, I support the motion before the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- We have four more speakers left on our batting list for today. Instead of suspending the proceedings for dinner, I will suggest that we push on to complete this. I do not see any objections, so we will proceed and call the next speaker.

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and fellow citizens of Fiji; I rise today with immense pride and deep purpose to speak in support of the 2025-2026 National Budget, a blueprint that not only outlines our fiscal responsibilities but reaffirms our commitment to a safer, more inclusive and prosperous Fiji. At this critical juncture in our nation's development, we must take stock of where we have come from and where we are headed.

The Coalition Government, under the capable and compassionate leadership of the honourable Prime Minister, has presented a budget that strikes a vital balance between economic resilience, social responsibility and national security. This Budget is more than numbers on a page. It is a vision grounded in values, transparency, equity and sustainability. It speaks to families, veterans, entrepreneurs, farmers, civil servants and young people, all of whom play indispensable roles in the life of this nation.

In my capacity as Assistant Minister for Defence and Veteran Affairs, I see clearly how this Budget strengthens not only our military and peacekeeping capacity but also the social systems that support those who have served our country with honour. Today, I add my voice to those celebrating this bold and thoughtful plan.

Mr. Speaker, the 2025-2026 National Budget is aptly themed Building Security, Stability and Prosperity. It is a budget that listens, responds and delivers. It reflects the aspirations of our people and the strategic direction of our Coalition Government.

This Budget is not just a financial document, it is a social contract. It affirms our commitment to inclusive growth, fiscal responsibility and national resilience. It is the product of extensive consultations with citizens, civil society and development partners and it is grounded on the principles of transparency, equity and long-term sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, among the most impactful measures is the reduction of VAT from 15 percent to 12.5 percent, which is effective from 1<sup>st</sup> August, 2025. This bold move will deliver \$250 million in direct tax relief, complemented by a continuation of zero-rated VAT on 22 essential items, including food staples and medicine. Together, these reforms represent \$500 million in VAT relief, easing the burden on every Fijian household.

Mr. Speaker, the Budget also introduces a 3 percent salary increase for all civil servants, building on last year's adjustments of 7 percent to 20 percent, resulting in a cumulative pay rise of 10 percent to 23 percent over the past year. This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a strategic investment in our public servants, recognising the dedication of our workforce and stimulating economic activity through increased household income.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, social welfare recipients and Government pensioners will receive a 5 percent increase in monthly allowances, on top of the 15 percent increase provided in the previous Budget. This reflects our unwavering commitment to protecting the most vulnerable in our society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these measures are not isolated. They are part of a broader framework that includes:

- \$800 million allocated to the Ministry of Public Works for infrastructure upgrades;
- \$611 million for the Ministry of Health, including a roadmap for a new \$2 billion national hospital;
- \$284 million for water infrastructure improvements across the country; and
- continued support for free education, transport subsidies and Back-to-School Assistance for students.

This Budget is a testament to our Government's resolve to build a Fiji that is secure, stable and prosperous, not just for today but for generations to come.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as Assistant Minister for Defence and Veterans Affairs, I am proud to highlight the provisions in this Budget that directly support our servicemen and women, past and present, and reinforce our national security architecture. The 2025-2026 Budget allocates \$220 million to support veterans and civil servants, including \$0.8 million in medical allowances for members of the Aftercare Fund. This targeted support ensures that those who had served our nation with distinction receive the care and dignity they deserve. It is a tangible expression of our gratitude and a reaffirmation of our duty to those who defended our freedom.

Beyond individual support, the budget strengthens institutional capacity. The Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) receives a total allocation of \$168 million. With \$52 billion earmarked for overseas peacekeeping operations, Fiji's continued presence in global peacekeeping missions demonstrates our unwavering commitment to international stability and our reputation as a trusted partner in global security.

The \$168 million budgetary allocation emphasises the Government's recognition of the RFMF's critical role in national defence and its contribution to peacekeeping duties abroad, while also supporting the Forces' modernisation and capacity-building efforts, and is intended to cover several key areas:

- Operational readiness - ensuring that the RFMF remains fully equipped and prepared to respond to national security challenges, natural disasters and international peacekeeping obligations.
- Capital projects and equipment - funding for the maintenance and upgrade of infrastructure, acquisition of modern equipment and enhancement of logistical capacity.
- Community support initiatives - continuing with RFMF's engagement in national development projects, humanitarian assistance, disaster response and community outreach programmes.

This Budget also supports broader reform in the Civil Service, including continued investment in training and capacity-building for public servants, strengthening of institutional independence and reduction of political interference. These reforms are essential to building a professional, resilient and responsive public service, one that can meet the evolving needs of our people and uphold the values of transparency and accountability.

For the Ministry of Defence and Veterans Affairs, this Budget is a reflection of the Government's commitment to strengthening national security, supporting our disciplined forces and honouring the service and welfare of our veterans. It addresses both, immediate operational requirements and long-term investments that ensure the safety, resilience, and dignity of all those who serve and have served our nation.

For Veterans Affairs, I wholeheartedly welcome the allocation and initiatives that continue to honour the service and dedication of our ex-servicemen and women. These brave individuals laid the foundation of the freedom we enjoy today, and it is only right that we, as a nation, ensure their welfare, dignity and well-being.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to highlight key allocations and initiatives on our portfolio which will directly contribute to enhancing national security, improving support services for our veterans, while aligning with the broader objectives of economic recovery, social protection and good governance, as outlined in this Budget.

The Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs is pleased to announce a 5 percent increase in the allocation for veteran affairs in the 2025-2026 National Budget, rising from \$14 million in the previous financial year to \$15 million this year. This increase reflects the Government's continued commitment to supporting our veterans and recognising the evolving needs of those who have served our nation with honour. The additional funds will allow the Ministry to address several key priorities.

- Inclusion of new veterans – the budget increase will cater for the growing number of veterans registering under the programme, ensuring that all eligible servicemen and servicewomen are supported with the recognition and assistance they deserve.
- Support for servicemen - Provisions within the new budget will further strengthen support mechanisms for current and former servicemen, including welfare programmes, rehabilitation and reintegration services.

The creation of new posts to improve the delivery of services to veterans and enhance operational efficiency. The budget also supports the establishment of new positions within the Veteran Affairs Division which will ensure the Ministry is better resourced to respond to the growing demand for services and outreach.

The increase is a significant step forward in ensuring that the Ministry can sustain and expand its services while honouring the nation's obligation to those who have served in the region. The budget also supports ongoing programmes under veteran affairs, where we remain committed to strengthening our outreach to veterans in rural and maritime areas, ensuring no one is left behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs is not just about uniforms and protocols, it is about people. It is about ensuring that every veteran, every peacekeeper and every civil servant feels valued, supported and empowered to serve with pride.

The 2025-2026 National Budget is not only a social and development roadmap. It is a statement of fiscal discipline and economic foresight. It reflects our Government's commitment to responsible stewardship of public finances, even as we respond to global uncertainties and domestic needs.

To further strengthen investor confidence, the Budget emphasises policy and legislative certainty, ensuring businesses can plan and invest without fear of sudden changes, a commitment to no surprises in economic policy, fostering an environment of trust and predictability, continued support for private sector growth, including tax incentives and infrastructure development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget also introduces targeted tax incentives to promote innovation, sustainability and social inclusion. These measures are not just fiscal tools, they are instruments of transformation. They empower businesses to innovate, communities to thrive and our economy to transition towards green energy, inclusive employment and resilient growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I conclude, I wish to reaffirm my full support for the 2025-2026 National Budget, not just as the Assistant Minister for Defence and Veterans Affairs, but as a servant of the people. This Budget is not simply an allocation of funds. It is a bold declaration of our priorities, values and shared future. It honours our veterans, strengthens our security and empowers our Civil Service. It reaches deeply to the heart of our communities, lifting up the vulnerable, energising the economy and laying the foundation for progress that is both equitable and enduring.

I commend our tireless civil servants and development partners for their dedication in crafting this Budget. I commend the honourable Minister for Finance for his visionary leadership and clear-eyed commitment to fiscal transparency. I commend all honourable Members of Parliament across the aisle for engaging in the kind of constructive dialogue that strengthens our democracy.

To the people of Fiji, I say this Budget belongs to you. It reflects your voices, your struggles and your hopes. It is now our collective responsibility to ensure it is successfully implemented. Let us move forward together in unity, in purpose and in service to our great nation.

HON. S. KIRAN.- The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and dear people of Fiji; I rise in support of the Coalition Government's 2025-2026 National Budget, delivered by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance.

This budget, guided by the theme, "Building Securities, Stability and Prosperity", reflects our collective vision for a more inclusive, resilient and equitable Fiji. It is a budget that speaks directly to the heart of the national priorities, protecting the most vulnerable, uplifting those in need and ensuring that no Fijians is left behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection has been allocated \$207.9 million for the 2025-2026 Financial Year. An increase of \$8.4 million from the previous fiscal



year, a clear reaffirmation of the Coalition Government's unwavering commitment, to strengthening our social protection systems and empowering the most marginalised members of our society.

These allocations includes funding for various social welfare programmes, such as the:

- Family Assistance Scheme;
- Social Pension Scheme;
- Care and Protection Allowance;
- Disability Allowance;
- Food Vouchers for Rural Pregnant Mothers; and
- Transport Assistance Scheme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 86.5percent of the total budget is allocated to Social Protection Allowances, aimed at protecting vulnerable population and fostering overall wellbeing. There has been an increase in the allocation due to the 5percent increase in monthly allowance for all social welfare recipients and Government pensioners. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this increase comes on top of the 15percent increase, implemented in 2023, bringing the total cumulative increase to 20 percent on social protection schemes and 25p ercent on social pension scheme for 70 years and over in only the last two years.

Mr. Speaker, the decrease in VAT to 12.5 percent will also allow our recipient to purchase more items, with the social assistance allowance adding to 22 items that has zero percent VAT. This is a testament to our Government's empathy driven leadership and its responsiveness to the needs of the most vulnerable citizens. It is a clear signal that social protection is not a peripheral issue, but a pillar of a national development agenda.

Today, more than 107,000 Fijians benefit directly from our ministry's Social Protection Programs. Programmes that continue to provide a vital, safety network for families, children, the elderly, the persons with disabilities. This includes:

- 11,000 recipients supported through the Care and Protection Allowance;
- more than 23,000 families assisted through the Family Assistance Scheme;
- Over 14,000 persons living with disabilities benefitting from the Disability Allowance;
- more than 57,000 elderly citizens receiving support through the Social Pension Scheme and over 28,000 individuals would benefit from the Transport Assistance Scheme.

Now with 10 percent subsidy on bus fare, these recipients like others will be able to add additional miles on their travel free of charge.

Social Protection is not a stand-alone intervention, Mr. Speaker, but it is a critical pillar of Fiji's long-term development vision. As articulated in Fiji's National Development Plan for 2025-2029, along with its overarching vision in 2050 focussing in building a resilient, sustainable and inclusive nation, the Plan commits to reduce poverty and vulnerability, promoting inclusive and equitable economic growth and ensuring that no Fijian is left behind, particularly during times of hardship and crisis.

Our Ministry fully aligns its investment in social protection with the goals of National Development Plan. We are building a system that is inclusive, efficient and shock responsive. This budget supports the key National Development Plan priorities including the expanding targeted assistance to low income household, persons with disabilities, older persons, women and children. Enhancing gender equality and social inclusion through more responsive programmes and tailored outreach. Strengthening adaptive systems including anticipatory cash, transfers and climate refinancing tools like parametric insurance and modernising the social protection management information systems and its delivery to improve transparency, accountability, and speed of response.

This Budget supports the continued roll out of Social Protection Reforms, Fiji's Adaptive Social Protection Strategy and strengthens monitoring and evaluation systems, establishing grievance redress mechanisms, and invests in shock-responsive, gender-sensitive delivery systems.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we acknowledge with deep gratitude the continued support of the Australian Government through the Vuvale Partnership for the financial and technical support provided on various activities on the social protection agenda including the ongoing development of a digital management information system, and related reforms to strengthen the social protection system through improved delivery, targeting, coverage and adequacy, monitoring and evaluation, grievance redress mechanism and communications plan.

The allocation of \$1.5 million through this partnership and \$0.5 million contribution towards the reforms are helpful to close critical gaps, address instances of abuse or inefficiencies, and strengthen accountability.

We are not just building safety nets, but we are building pathways to empowerment and long-term resilience. The Ministry continues to work with the Development Partners to pilot other initiatives such as cash transfers through Anticipatory Action and Parametric Insurance programmes to provide rapid support for social protection beneficiaries in times of climate shocks.

I would like to acknowledge the support of UNDP - United Nations Development Programme, UNCDF - United Nations Capital Development Fund, UNDRR United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, UNOCHA - United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, RBF - Reserve Bank of Fiji, WFP - World Food Programme for their support in this regard.

The Economic Inclusion Programme which is also known as Welfare Graduation Programme is helping able-bodied and working age beneficiaries of social protection programmes transition to sustainable employment and income generation to achieve financial independence for their households. The Economic Inclusion Programme works closely with Government, CSOs and corporate partners to provide:

- (1) Business training as a pre-requisite for seed funding;
- (2) Access to schooling, university or Matua/TVET programmes;
- (3) Skills training to support income generating activities e.g. cash cropping, tailoring, market vending;
- (4) Assistance in setting up cooperatives, set up business for groups and institutions;
- (5) Access to formal employment through facilitating work placements and connecting to employers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this Budget, we reaffirm our unwavering commitment to the full implementation of social protection reforms. These reforms are rooted in the principles of fairness, transparency, and dignity and they are essential to protecting the most vulnerable members of our society from the impacts of poverty, inequality, and climate shocks, and empowering all to be able to contribute to the progress of this great nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in a landmark move, this Government established the Department of Children on October 4, 2024, reflecting our deep commitment to child rights-31 years after Fiji ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. We have also enacted two historic laws - the Child Care and Protection Act 2024 and the Child Justice Act 2024 - setting the foundation for a modern, integrated, and child-centred protection and justice system. These laws shift our approach from reactive to preventative-addressing root causes of harm and ensuring no child is left behind.

To support implementation, the 2025-2026 Budget allocates \$3.9 million, including:

- (1) \$350,794 for 10 new positions for child protection officers to strengthen frontline delivery; and
- (2) \$112,500 for policy, training, and implementation of the new Adoption Framework,

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these investments reaffirm this Government's resolve to protect our children—not in words, but through action, policy, and resources. UNICEF reports that 5 out of 6 children suffer abuse in Fiji and there is at least three cases of child sexual abuse being reported a week. Only today COMPOL has spoken about a rise in crime against children by 8 percent. There is a lot of work ahead to protect our children as we work on National Action Plan on Prevention of Child Abuse and are developing positive parenting programs with the support of UNICEF.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been working on supporting children who are ending up on our streets, sadly here they find drugs and are at high risk of contracting HIV. Many of these children are product of broken families or neglect.

We are reaching out to these children at risk living on our streets and with the support of inter-agency cooperation are working on various pathways for vocational education and employment. We have found it is difficult to speak about pathways while they are on the streets and there is a need for intervention centre where these children are able to find shelter to receive necessary rehabilitation support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget has an allocation of \$480,000 to help us construct and operate a child-wellbeing centre for these vulnerable children and we are glad to have an additional budget allocation of \$195,652 to support drug rehabilitation services for these children at risk before they can find pathways in education and employment as well as integration back in their families where possible.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we work on the streets, we have found increasing number of older persons and beggars making streets their home. They deserve a home where they can live with dignity. HART home has agreed to remodel one of the facilities to cater for older persons. This will allow us to find spaces for older persons living on our streets. We much appreciate this allocation under the Ministry of Housing budget. We wish to inform this honourable House that the Matanakilagi House has been renovated to accommodate HART 31 residents from the Golden Age Home in Lautoka. A total budget of \$344,900 had been allocated in the current financial year 2024/2025 to support this relocation.

This initiative was necessary to address the ongoing issues of Asian Subterranean Termites infestation and the deteriorating structural conditions at the current Lautoka site. Speaking of termites, I also welcome continued support for termite relief programme in the current budget. The Asian Subterranean Termites have created havoc for more than a decade and only when this Coalition Government came into power, then only with strong commitment and political will this issue has been looked at. There are now baits available in Fiji as well. The current budget has allocated budget for termite bait and relief programme ongoing from the last financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, back to Lautoka Golden Age Home, we have purchased new bedding and essential items to ensure our elderly residents are comfortably relocated in the coming weeks. To further improve the aged-care facilities, in this budget, there is an allocation to help us scope development of aged-care facilities for both Lautoka and Suva Golden Age Homes. To lay an expansion and plan for appropriate building facilities to meet the current needs.

We have been receiving increasing number of reports of cases of abuse of older persons. It requires critical review of the National Ageing Policy and National Council of Older Persons Act.

We much appreciate support to the National Council for Older Persons that will be able to undertake this review as well as establish divisional committee on older persons. And we appreciate the continued support to the National Council for Persons with Disabilities.

Mr. Speaker, the Cabinet endorsed Fiji Disability Policy and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which emphasises a human rights-based approach to ensure greater inclusion and equity for persons with disabilities. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the policy aims to improve the lives of people with disabilities by promoting their full participation in society, recognising interventions needed for disabilities in all its different levels of implements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Governments commitment is reflected in the estimated allocation of \$33.6 million which marks a significant step forward in advancing disability inclusion and ensuring that no one is left behind. This budget exists across six key line ministries, namely the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health and Medical Services, Ministry of Housing, Ministry of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Finance and our Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our aim is clear, to build a society where every Fijian regardless of age or ability is valued included and support to live with dignity. The Government continues to walk the talk when it comes to advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls across Fiji. This year's Budget places renewed emphasis on safe spaces and shelter services for survivors of gender-based violence following the launch of the National Shelter Guidelines, there has been an increase in grant allocation to women's institutions including those who provide emergency shelter. There is also an allocation to set up Women's Safe House in Lautoka which will provide temporary accommodation, counselling and case management services.

We acknowledge with gratitude the contribution of Soroptimist International in helping us establish the Shelter and commend our civil society and faith-based partners who continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with survivors of violence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our work to prevent violence against women and girls is being strengthened through a whole of government approach with continued funding with line ministries including Education, Health, iTaukei Affairs, Youth and Sports and Police. All supporting the delivery of the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls. In June, the Cabinet endorsed the Fiji Women's Economic Empowerment National Action Plan (WEENAP) 2025-2030, a landmark step towards inclusive economic growth. I am pleased to report that this Budget supports the implementation of key WEENAP activities. Ensuring women can access jobs, build businesses, and gain the skills needed to lead in their communities and our economy.

To further enhance women's economic participation, we are piloting a new Women's Emporium in Suva, a physical and digital marketplace for local artisans. Discussions are underway with Fiji Arts Council to secure a suitable location, and we will scale this model based on demand and success. The divisional and national expos will now be able to feed into this facility, and products from our rural artisans will find a continuous market through this initiative. We are also encouraged by the increased support for women in agriculture. The investment reinforces the Ministry of Agriculture's progressive gender in agriculture sector policy, and strengthens the work of the Gender Mainstreaming Action Group in promoting women's leadership and productivity in the agriculture sector.

As part of the Ministry's commitment to mainstreaming gender and the interests of all women and children in programmes and policies across the whole of Government, there is a budget allocation under the Department of Women for the rollout of Phase 2 of the Institutional Capacity Development Initiative, which complements the Gender Responsive Planning and Budgeting Programme initiative with the Ministry of Finance. I would like to thank and acknowledge the financial support from the New

Zealand Government in the design of Phase 2 of this programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government's agenda for women is clear - empowerment, safety, equality and economic justice. The Cabinet has approved for our Poverty Monitoring Unit to undertake a comprehensive review of Fiji's Poverty Alleviation and Eradication Strategy of 1999. This review will be informed by broad-based community and stakeholder consultations, and the Budget has been allocated to develop a national poverty framework looking at current challenges facing our people.

The Poverty Monitoring Unit has been specifically dedicated to the Integrated National Poverty Eradication Programme. Budget allocation in this financial year will enable the unit to monitor, evaluate and report on the impact and progress of Government's poverty alleviation programmes. This monitoring is critical to ensuring that our interventions remain relevant, data-driven and responsive to the needs of the most vulnerable. We also appreciate continued support to the REACH programme that takes targeted services to remote and rural areas.

Mr. Speaker, these targeted investments reflect the Ministry's continued commitment to strengthening poverty reduction efforts through evidence-based planning, strategic outreach and inter-agency collaboration. I also wish to acknowledge the valuable support the Ministry receives from our development partners and our many civil society organisations who work alongside us in delivering services and driving transformational changes in communities across Fiji. The total budget allocation of \$207.9 million reflects our Ministry's strong commitment to serving families, protecting children, empowering women, supporting people with disabilities and caring for our older persons. These figures are not just numbers, they are lives touched, burdens erased, eased and dignity restored. They embody our unwavering commitment to social justice, equity and inclusion.

I would like to thank the honourable Minister for Finance and his team for putting together a very thoughtful budget, taking into consideration the needs of the most vulnerable. I support the Budget, Mr. Speaker, may God bless Fiji and her people.

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Colleagues, honourable Leaders of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, *miau sa bula re*, a very good evening to you all.

A renowned politician once said that a budget should reflect the value and priorities of our nation and its people. I repeat, it should reflect the value and priorities of our nation and its people. Honourable Members of this august House, I wish to begin by paying homage to the traditional owners of the land on which we stand.

*Ni tiko saka nai tikotiko vakaturaga e Nadonumai, vua saka na turaga na Tui Suva*, paying utmost respect to the chiefs as well as the community leaders and members of the *vanua o Nadonumai* in caring for the *vanua*.

I acknowledge and commence the hard yards put into the Budget preparation and its presentation to the citizens of Fiji by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister. A massive congratulations to the Coalition Government. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is my great honour to respond to the 2025-2026 Budget in this respected august House.

This is my third time since 2022 participating in the discussion of Fiji's budget as the Assistant Minister for Education. In all of these discussions, I have emphasised to one degree or another that the nation's budget is not so much accounting or arithmetic as its content. I consider the essence of the budget, understanding this essence to be a very critical point, not only for the Members of Parliament, but for the public at large.

The budget is also a digital text that mirrors our reality, our successes and failures, our challenges and opportunities. It is important that we can translate the budget numbers and turn them into substantive text so that we can express it in digital format.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the budget has brought in optimism as any government budget has announced in the history of Fiji. However, it cautions individuals to manage finance in a prudent and sustainable way moving forward. The budget reignites confidence and mobilisation of the resources of all social partners and collectively invest more in infrastructure to increase potential growth.

This budget is pro-Fijian, and it gives hope to our children and to our youth through training and economic opportunity, hence continuously improving our education and health systems. It is a budget that is pro-life accelerating transformation towards an inclusive economy and participation by all, hence strengthening social solidarity and extension of our social safety net. The budget rests on the ideas of an inclusive social contract, encompassing an equitable burden of tax and a progressive programme of expenditures. The budget relies on institutions of good governance and a public ethic that values honesty and fairness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we act together on these principles, as public representatives, civil servants, business people, youth, workers and citizens, we can overcome the challenges of tough economic times and difficult adjustments. In acting together, we can address declining confidence and the retreat of capital, and we can combat emerging patterns of predatory behaviour and corruption in our beloved Fiji. We are conscious of the difficulties we face. Our resilience as a nation can propel us to a better future if we make the right choices.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the education section in receiving a huge chunk of the budget of \$847.8 million is greatly thankful for Fiji is blessed in its investment in children. Access to quality basic education should not be a privilege only afforded to some, but to every child here in Fiji. There are far too many children in our country for whom quality education is out of reach and for whom life chances are severely diminished. We simply cannot shy away from our responsibilities to our beloved children of Fiji. This is not a speech in which to announce detailed implementation plans. It is rather a speech about commitment and an urge to act and walk the talk. Announcing a budget is just a tip of the iceberg.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it would be irresponsible to change programmes and initiatives already running good operations. However, going forward, it must be made clear that the implementation of policies or programmes without evidence of their value in our concerted efforts to improve the quality outcomes of the system must be avoided at all cost.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our learners, our children deserve nothing less. We must go far beyond the policies and plans within our structure, within our Ministry. We must objectively assess the outcomes that the Ministry of Education has and the impact we are making in the lives of learners. This is especially important in Fiji, but most especially in vulnerable contexts where there are clearly spelt out challenges such as drugs, HIV/AIDS, and school dropouts.

Substance and Abuse Advisory Council (SAAC) is grateful, for with this budget, they are able to continue their efforts in rendering counter measures to address some of the pressing issues facing our young people of today.

Investments would be geared towards training of heads of schools, principals, child protection officers, chaplain and student leaders. Training would also go far as reaching our church leaders and village headmen. There will be increased awareness programmes in schools and communities identified as high-risk area with stakeholders. Community awareness programme will also be conducted in the Central, Western and Northern Divisions.

Our stakeholders play a fundamental role in assisting the management of student behaviour, and so the war on drugs can only be conquered through concerted and strengthened network with partners and stakeholders in the drug harm and demand reduction campaign.

Meeting with the drugs taskforce will be a continued effort to assess progress, identify gaps and map the way forward. Awareness will be done using social media, brochures, posters, radios and television. The Substance Abuse and Advisory Council is also opening district counselling hubs with a professional counsellor and will work with church rehabilitation centres on high-risk students. With a lot of undue pressures facing our children, we are hoping to engage more professional counsellors to assist students with mental health issues.

If our budget truly commits in countering these issues, then we are doing due diligence by creating paths to success for many who have been excluded from the economic advantages of having a good education. Therefore, we must be bolder, ambitious and set high evidence-based targets for ourselves. We must critically assess our targets and milestones as a Ministry. For example, the Ministry's budget though pro-children, gives flexibility to various stakeholders that if not justly utilised and accounted for, could create more harm than good. The principle of democracy is emanated in this budget; power is given to the people to decide but decide and make choices with integrity and justice.

Given the critical role of school governing bodies and stakeholders in relation to much of what the public school will do with the grant commitments, this is simply not good enough. We must do better. In my short time in the office, I have already been approached by parents whose children are still struggling with reading for meaning or manipulating simple numbers. The fact of the matter is, we are still struggling with basic literacy and numeracy. I hope that with the autonomy given to schools and management on the use of Free Education Grant, key priority areas tailored to individual schools would be invested accordingly including intervention to address literacy and numeracy in our schools in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the public wants to know how we will reconcile reality with setting targets, and I, therefore, applaud the progress of the *Denarau Declaration* which has mapped the pathway for education. While it is a strategic guide for the Ministry of Education, we are also realising and addressing the gaps and those components of our education system, making sure that every learner has a fair chance of staying the course with compulsory education.

Moving forward, the Ministry intends to review a lot of its legislations, curriculum and streamline processes to achieve desired outcomes of all initiatives carefully. These initiatives simply cannot be allowed to be implemented if they stand still a chance of succeeding of having an impact on the lives of learners.

The link between monitoring and improvements is obvious, but it is easy to confuse increased monitoring with automatic increased performance. This is simply not the case. This is another area where the Ministry of Education will be critically assessing whether our efforts to monitor quality in the system are truly driving improvements or not. This needs to include all our key stakeholders across the sector, as well as experts in key disciplines. The recent Education Commission setup, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will be an invaluable resource in ensuring that our efforts to strengthen our education system are targeted, evidence-based and informed by best practices.

Our increase in budget for the ECE sector and especially for ECE teachers is evidence of the Coalition Government's commitment to building a solid foundation for a quality and efficient basic education system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Education will intensify efforts to improve access to and quality of early childhood development, recognising that the formative years are critical to laying a strong

foundation for our children's education journey.

We are steadfast on not only providing access to quality education but also ensuring that no one is left behind. With this allocated budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will increase efforts to improve access and the quality of inclusive education for learners in our most vulnerable communities and learners with special education needs. It is our duty to ensure that our education system is accommodating and supportive of all learners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will intensify efforts to improve access and the quality of training and professional development opportunities available to our school management teams and teachers. Teachers are the backbone of our schooling system. Given the many and varied challenges that our teachers and principals are required to respond to in their daily work, we need to ensure that they are supported to achieve the quality learning outcomes we so desperately need. The additional enabler is the new budget allocation to Fiji Head Teachers Association as well as the Fiji School Principal's Association where dialogue and action plans are geared towards sharing best practices as well as mapping ways to address the 21st century challenges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also committed to working tirelessly to improve the safety and quality of schooling environments for our learners and teachers. This includes reducing overcrowding in classrooms especially in the Central Division, improving access to WASH facilities and ensuring infrastructures that are disability friendly.

We also wish to remind this august House that our Strategic Action Plan gives expression to the Constitution, the National Development Plan 2025-2029, as well as the regional and international conventions continue to provide the moral imperative and a mandate to Government to make the social justice principles of access, redress, equity, efficiency, inclusivity and quality education opportunities are widely available to all citizens.

In a nutshell, there is growing acknowledgement that deliberate and sustained systemic efforts must be made to improve the quality of teaching and learning in Fiji schools. At all times, we must remind ourselves about the non-negotiables for the Basic Education Sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as with the Coalition Government, our national and provincial partners and stakeholders in the basic education sector need to work collaboratively, creatively and earnestly, irrespective of our different backgrounds and beliefs, to ensure that we make meaningful strides in strengthening and enhancing our existing systems and doing everything possible to improve the life chances of our children. The best interests of our learners need to guide our collective efforts in this regard.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to thank the honourable Minister for Education and indeed the Ministry of Education team as a whole. They have made the onboarding process over the past three years smooth and demonstrated what can be done when we are brought together by a common goal of improving lives.

Let me end by thanking each and every stakeholder including our donor agencies who continuously play an active role in the delivery of education in our country each day - schools and their heads of schools, educators, staff, controlling authorities and governing bodies. To the teacher unions, governing body associations and independent school associations that support them, To the civil society and community-based organisations and to our parents. Please continue with me on our learning journey.



With your support, we can improve the quality of education outcomes in Fiji for this generation and future generation of learners. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the National Budget 2025-2026 before Parliament. May God bless the children of Fiji and may God bless us all.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, may I begin in saying as the son of Lau and Fiji, I want to acknowledge with deep reverence and national pride, the recent instalment of the *Turaga Bale na Tui Nayau, Tui Lau, Sau ni Vanua o Lau*. This is a sacred and historical moment that marks the reaffirmation of chiefly leadership in the Lau Province. It also signifies the enduring strength of our *vanua* identity and traditions. I extend my heartfelt congratulations to the *Turaga Bale* and may his leadership be guarded by wisdom, unity and unwavering service to his people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I lend my full support to the 2025-2026 National Budget recently presented by the honourable Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics. This is not just a set of numbers and allocations. This is a firm, practical and carefully thought-out response to the challenges facing our nation today.

We are not operating in ordinary times. Globally and here at home, we continue to face immense pressure whether it is from economic shocks, climate threats or the rising cost of living. During all these, this Government has chosen to respond with clarity, responsibility and compassion. This budget is grounded in purpose because we understand the gravity of what our people are going through and it is guided by clarity because we know exactly who we are trying to protect and support in this budget – our families, businesses, workers and our most vulnerable. One of the clearest signals in this budget is its care for those who are struggling the most. Some families live day to day, meal to meal, working hard, yet still falling short. This budget brings them a real relief.

Mr. Speaker, the \$46.4 million for family assistance, the 5 percent increase in monthly Social Welfare Assistance and the \$25 million set aside for free water, medicines, electricity subsidy, the free education and the free bus fare scheme for school children and many others. We have cut VAT from 15 percent to 12.5 percent, lowered food tariffs and removed fiscal duties on some items from 15 percent to zero. These are not just figures on paper. They are lifelines for the families struggling to make ends meet.

Mr. Speaker, this budget is inclusive, not just in words but in action. It reaches every corner of our society. It backs large businesses and small home-run ventures alike. It speaks to the urban business, rural farmer, the workers, unemployed youth and retired elder. It is a budget for every Fijian - from the unborn child to the elderly in their golden years. Every Fijian has a place in our national story, no matter their background or ability.

This budget also builds for the future. It lays strong foundations for resilient systems that can withstand global shocks. We are backing our workers, fuelling innovation and investing in the infrastructure that will carry this country forward, but more than that, we are empowering our people. This budget gives Fijians the tools to shape their own progress and support to succeed. It reflects our commitment to good governance - spending public money wisely, transparently and always in the national interest. It strengthens our security and lays the groundwork for long-term stability. It invests in safe transport, climate resilience and the public services our people rely on because prosperity takes root when people feel secure, system hold firm and leadership delivers.

Mr. Speaker, at the heart of the Fiji Land Transport Network are its people. It is not just about roads or vehicles, it is about children travelling safely to school, parents commuting to work and markets, and returning home to their families without worry. It is about taxi drivers, bus drivers, nurses, firefighters, the backbone of our country and our daily life and economy - so every journey matters. That is why this Budget takes bold steps to modernise, strengthen and expand the LTA with a clear focus on people, safety, service and our nation's progress.

The LTA's operational budget rises from \$26 million last year to \$29.6 million in this fiscal year, an increase of almost \$3.6 million, to deliver faster, more efficient and accessible services nationwide. This funding also supports the rental and maintenance of 18 offices across Fiji. For Fijians, this means shorter waiting times, responsive staff, better enforcement and stronger public trust.

The capital budget stands at \$12.2 million for eight key projects aligned with digitisation, infrastructure, road safety and decentralisation. A sum of \$5.87 million goes to the LTA integrated system - a digital leap forward. People in Sigatoka or Savusavu will be able to renew their licence online, no longer trips or queues needed.

The \$2.89 million continues the Labasa Office restoration project - a modern facility improving access and working conditions in the Northern Division. The \$589,130 funds an immutable backup system protecting critical data from the cyber-attacks, ensuring services stay online and citizens' information stays secure.

The sum of \$191,304 is set aside to purchase land for a new weighbridge in Sigatoka, which will help reduce road damage and improve transport safety. The \$278,260 funds a new express office at Nakasi, easing congestion and bringing service closer to families and business in busy Suva-Nausori corridor.

The \$331,130 will purchase five portable speed cameras, targeting accident-prone hotspots, school zones and village crossings to save lives through smarter and modern enforcement. A sum of \$304,347 supports an automatic number plate recognition and surveillance camera at inspection lanes, boosting transparency and fair enforcement of roadworthiness.

Finally, \$869,565 funds an automatic vehicle inspection lane at Valelevu, which speeds up checks, supports emissions control and reduces long queues for thousands of vehicle owners in the area. Mr. Speaker, we are building a land transport system that prioritises safety, is modern, responsive and inclusive, considering the transportation needs of all Fijians, from urban dwellers to the most remote rural residents. This Budget commits \$41.7 million, \$29.6 million for operation and \$12.2 million for capital projects to transform our land transport sector and propel Fiji forward.

Mr. Speaker, a modern, fair and accountable transport system does not happen by chance, it requires bold reform. That is why in the 2025-2026 financial year, the Ministry of Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport, in partnership with LTA, will roll out key amendments to the Land Transport Act 1998. These changes are not just technical, they are about delivering safer roads, better services and more transparent system for all Fijians.

**Land Transport Public Service Vehicle Regulations:** We are introducing temporary road permits to meet peak public demand or fill service gap when operators fall short. The heart of this decision is no Fijians should be left stranded.

We are also suspending permit transfer through sales and purchases, closing the door on speculation and ensuring permits serve the public interest and not for profit margins. From 2020 to 2034, nearly \$65 million in permits changed hands. That is not transport policy, that is market, and we are changing that.

Notably, the average buying price of permits from January 2024 to April 2024 was around \$41,000, compared to \$38,986 for the year 2023. This highlights the urgent need to remove the ability to transfer permits through sales to prevent the monopolistic control, and ensure that permits serve public interests.

Land Transport (Fee and Penalties) Regulations: Currently, if a truck driver ignores enforcement instructions, there is little our officers can do. That ends now. We are closing legal loopholes, protecting our roads and holding overloading vehicles accountable.

Land Transport (Traffic Infringement Notice) Regulation: Unpaid traffic fines has ballooned to \$24 million since 2001. We are introducing structured payment plans to recover these debts, sensibly supporting compliance without punishing hardship and reducing the need for legal enforcement.

Land Transport (Vehicle Registration and Construction) Regulation: We are expanding payment plan options for certain vehicle-related offences, reducing pressure on struggling owners, while promoting compliance and safety.

Land Transport (Driver) Regulations: We are introducing a two-stage provisional licensing system - P1 and P2 - to ensure that new drivers earn full licences through experience and safe behaviour. Progression will depend on their record, not just time. A licence is not just a right, it is a responsibility. These are not just regulatory changes, they are reforms that prioritise safety, accountability and public trust. They close gaps, modernise systems and reflect this Government's commitment to a land transport system that works for every Fijian fairly, reliably and responsibly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the heart of our maritime sector are the people – the school children boarding boats each morning, the market vendors sending goods across the island, the fishermen rising with tide and the families waiting for the next ship to bring supplies, medicine and loved ones. This Budget honours those daily realities and backs them with the support needed to make our seas safer, our services more reliable and our institutions stronger. This year, Government is investing in the Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF) to safeguard lives, enforce regulations and manage our vital blue transport lifeline sustainably.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no ship sails without capable crew, and MSAF's strength lies in its people. We will fully implement the long-overdue Job Evaluation Exercise (JEE), ensuring fair pay, better retention and stronger systems for our maritime communities. We are also funding in-house technical training, reducing costly reliance on consultants, so MSAF can act faster and serve more communities across the islands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the tragic stories of missing boats and overloaded vessels are not just numbers – they are fathers, sons and futures lost. That is why we are investing in critical infrastructure, such as lighthouses and beacons, especially in our outer islands where navigation is most challenging. These upgrades make crossings safe day or night, calm or storm. We are scaling up search and rescue training and sea patrols, so when emergencies strike, we respond quickly, bringing families peace of mind.

Safety at sea depends on skilled operators. Since January 2024, MSAF has trained and certified hundreds of Boat Masters and Restricted Master Engineers. With more sessions planned, for the coming year, at least 720 more Fijians will gain these vital skills.

Through the Maritime Awareness Initiative, we are expanding training to rural and maritime communities, offering proper licensing and opening doors to formal jobs and for those intending to run small businesses. We will also boost inspections and awareness in tourism hotspots, protecting passengers and ensuring operators in places like Yasawa, Lomaiviti and Kadavu work safely and confidently.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Maritime standards evolve fast, and Fiji must keep pace. Cabinet has approved a full review of our maritime laws and regulations. These reforms will close and Fiji must keep pace.

Cabinet has approved a full review of our maritime laws and regulations. These reforms will close loopholes, clarify enforcement and make rules clearer and fairer, especially for rural fishermen and community transport co-operatives. This Budget also commits \$500,000 to MSAF's digitisation programme, cutting red tape, speeding up permits and improving vessel tracking. For island communities, this means quicker service and safer seas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a Budget that understands the moment we are in. It responds not with panic, but with poise; not with short-term fixes, but with long-term solutions. It is a Budget that protects, includes and, most importantly, that builds. Let us move forward together towards a more secure, stable, and prosperous Fiji.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion before the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before we close, I wish to thank all honourable Members for today - those of you who have contributed, as well as those of you who are waiting and listening. We will continue with our list of the batting order tomorrow morning.

Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of today's sitting. Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 7.36 p.m.



**APPENDIX 1****Continuation of the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Civil Service, Public Enterprises and Information's response to the Budget Address (Ref. Page 1024)****Office of the Prime Minister**

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now turn to the operations of the Office of the Prime Minister, and I welcome the allocation of \$8.7 million. It is within this Office that the pulse of Government leadership is strongest – the place where all agencies, Ministries come together and work collaboratively towards this mission.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will not govern from a distance – we will lead from the front, shoulder-to-shoulder with our citizens.

**Administration and Logistics – Constitution and Governance**

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under my leadership, we uphold the constitution – not as a dusty legal text, but as a living compass. It is the highest law of our land, a reflection of who we are, what we value, and what we aim to become.

As Chair of the Constitutional Offices Commission, I take seriously the responsibility to preserve our institutions' independence while ensuring those entrusted with national responsibility serve with integrity, not self-interest. We must never allow governance to become disconnected from the people it serves.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while governance is collective, responsibility is singular. I respect the autonomy of boards, commissions and Ministries – but to all who lead within government: The Buck Stops Here. We operate on the principles of unity of command, clarify of purpose and responsiveness to the people.

I remain committed to ensuring that every regulation, every appointment and every action taken under my charge is aligned with public good, transparency and service delivery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Coalition Government has taken on the difficult but necessary task of reforming a neglected legislative landscape.

We are modernising governance, updating outdated frameworks and crafting legislation that matches the demands of today and the aspirations of tomorrow. It is not merely about technical improvements - it is about restoring faith in our institutions.

To our people, and to this august House, I say this:

**We are each a battalion in this national campaign. The Government cannot do it alone.  
We need every Fijian on the frontline.**

So, I urge you all to do your part: From rural settlements to urban centres, from the frontline ministries to the furthers islands, every Fijians has a role to play. This Budget is our battle plan – designed not just to survive, but to thrive.

Your Coalition Government has shaped this response not in theory, but in practical service to the people – to meet their immediate needs, restore their dignity, and secure a better future.

Let us remember: Fiji has faced storms before. And every time, we rise. Let us rise with courage and clarity. And most of all – let us rise together - for our people, for our children and for our beloved Fiji.

This is not a time for apathy. This is not a time for partisanship. This is a time for action! Let the history books record that in 2025, Fiji rallied to a powerful and strong call – and won. Not with tanks, but with teamwork. Not with guns, but with good governance. Not with fear, but with faith.

Let us move Fiji forward with determination and grit. Together, we can do it!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the 2025-2026 Budget to this august House. *Vina'a va'alevu*. May God bless you, and may God bless Fiji.