

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

TUESDAY, 15TH JULY, 2025

[CORRECTED COPY]

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TUESDAY, 15TH JULY, 2025

The Parliament met at 9.41 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, the honourable Minister for Immigration, the honourable Assistant Minister for Transport and Infrastructure and honourable Shalen Kumar.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Monday, 14th July, 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 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.

Honourable Members, please join me in warmly welcoming the Years 6, 7 and 8 students and teachers of Gospel School for the Deaf. Welcome to your Parliament. I hope you will use this opportunity to learn more about how your Parliament works, as well as deepening your understanding of its role in democracy.

Written Response

For the information of all honourable Members, the secretariat has received the Written Response from the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics to Written Question No. 59 of 2025 asked by honourable Premila Kumar. The response has been conveyed to honourable Premila Kumar and a copy uploaded to the Parliament's website.

Back to Office Report – United Pasifika Council of Victoria

If you have the opportunity to peruse the Back to the Office Report for the official visit to the Parliament of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia, you will see that the delegation had an opportunity to meet with the United Pasifika Council of Victoria. At this juncture, I wish to acknowledge the members

of the United Pasifika Council of Victoria in their ongoing efforts to support and empower Pacific communities across the state of Victoria. Economic opportunities, access to education and strong family connections have drawn many Pasifika peoples to settle in Victoria.

The United Pasifika Council represents communities from 10 Pacific island nations, including elders and families from Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Nauru, Tuvalu, Cook Islands, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Niue. Today, Victoria is home to more than 79,000 Pasifika individuals, with 35 percent born in the Pacific Islands.

Your colleagues, the honourable Kalaveti Ravu, honourable Sachida Nand and honourable Vijay Nath, who accompanied me on the visit, will share with you some of the concerns that were raised by the Fijian diaspora in our meetings in Melbourne.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE 2025-2026 APPROPRIATION BILL 2025

MR. SPEAKER.- For the information of honourable Members, for exceptional reasons I have approved the virtual attendance of honourable Premila Kumar, who will be our first speaker today.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Thank you, Sir, for allowing me to speak virtually. Today, I will respond, not just with words, but with facts to reveal the lies behind the shiny packaging of the 2025-2026 National Budget presented by the honourable Minister for Finance.

At first glance, this budget dazzles a 2.5 percent VAT reduction, a 3 percent civil service pay rise, and a 5 percent increase in social pensions; all dressed up to win headlines and applause. But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, beyond the dazzles lies a plan built on panic and not on vision, and also not for tomorrow's Fiji, but for today's political survival. This budget tries to distract the public from the deeper failures. These include stalled growth, unsustainable borrowing, ballooning deficits and the absence of real reform.

It reminds me of walking into a supermarket flooded with specials. The front aisles are stacked with giveaways, but the shelves that matter the most such as infrastructure, job creation and private sector growth are either empty or ignored.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from 7.5 percent in 2023, a natural post – COVID bounce, growth dropped to 4 percent in 2024 and is forecasted to slide further to 3.2 percent in 2025. This is not a normal correction. It is the price we are paying for the reckless imposition of austerity measures prescribed by the Fiscal Review Committee that showed the momentum of our economic recovery post-COVID-19.

While economic growth is slow, the Government's deficit is set to nearly double in just two years, jumping from 3.4 percent to a projected 6 percent in 2025-2026. That is a staggering 76.5 percent increase, reflecting alarming fiscal deterioration. Where is the strategy to lift sectors like ICTs, manufacturing or agriculture and where is the courage to diversify beyond tourism, reform state-owned enterprises or cut Government wastage? So much for claims of responsible budgeting. This is fiscal management drifting aimlessly unaware of the cliff ahead and also hoping the public will not notice the looming consequences.

Borrowing itself is not wrong. What matters is what you do with it, but this Government is not borrowing to build the nation, it is borrowing to pay their bills. Capital expenditure is budgeted at \$926.6 million; debt servicing has now ballooned to \$1.48 billion, which is a staggering 50 percent jump from the previous year. Even more alarming, was that it is twice as much as what we were paying in 2022-2023 when it stood at \$743.5 million after COVID-19 borrowing. This is definitely not that repayment.

Now a lot more is spent on repaying debt, than investing in capital projects which are needed to grow our economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the figures speak for themselves. Despite the Government's narrative on economic growth, 81 percent of the budget is consumed by operational expenses, leaving a mere 19 percent for capital investment. That is decline of 16.5 percent from the previous year. This is not building more assets; it is blowing up money with no returns. It is a mere survival strategy from a Government that has run out of ideas and direction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, how swiftly promises fade. The campaign on reducing debt and reckless borrowing when that borrowing was necessary to deal with COVID-19. In the very first budget, they increased VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent, claiming that it necessary to pay off unsustainable debt. However, uncontrolled borrowing continued for operational expenses with no natural disasters, no pandemics and no major infrastructure work. Let us look at what they have done.

In 2006, debt was \$2.87 billion. After 12 and a half years, including cyclones and infrastructure investment, debt rose to \$5.73 billion. COVID-19, an unprecedented crisis, increased debt to \$9.1 billion to save lives and jobs. Now, without a pandemic or cyclone, debt is projected to reach \$11.7 billion by July 2026 and around \$12.6 billion by the end of this Government's term.

In just two years, this Government has borrowed \$2.6 billion, almost as much as what the Bainimarama Government borrowed over 12 years. This is their record. By the end of their term, this Government would have irresponsibly added \$3.3 billion onto our national debt, without any national crisis to warrant such borrowing.

They lie to voters, promising fiscal responsibility and sound economic management, only to plunge the nation into deeper debt. To put this into perspective, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the previous government borrowed \$6.4 billion over 16 years, managing more than 14 cyclones and once in a century pandemic. This Government in one term will add \$3.3 billion with no national crisis. That is more than half of what the previous government accumulated in 16 years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government only talks but it cannot deliver. This is the record they are going to leave behind. This is not a debt reduction but is a failure of leadership and fiscal discipline. How can the people of Fiji trust a Government that treats national debt as an endless credit line, risking our nation's future? It is like running up the national credit card to host a party, then borrowing again to pay the bill. Let us be clear. If debt was being paid off, it would not rise from \$9.1 billion to \$11.7 billion. These are not signs of debt being paid off, but a sign of debt spiralling out of control.

The honourable Minister for Finance boasts that the debt-to-GDP ratio has improved to comfort the public, not because they paid down the debt, but because GDP naturally rose when tourism resumed, and trade returned. That is basic economics. When the economy grows, the ratio improves, even if debt remains the same.

In 2023, the economy grew by 7.5 percent with pent-up demand from tourists. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the debt-to-GDP ratio in January 2023 – which means this Government was in office just barely one month, and the debt-to-GDP ratio was 79.8 percent. That is below 80 percent because of the early opening of our borders. But now with continued borrowing, the ratio is heading back to 79.6 percent, right where it was in 2023. Where did the extra revenue go that was collected by increasing VAT, corporate tax, fees and charges to pay debt? Surely not towards paying off debt for new capital projects. So where did the money go?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the extra revenue collected tirelessly by FRCS was used for maintaining a bloated Cabinet with three Deputy Prime Ministers, 18 Ministers and 12 Assistant Ministers. If this is not wastage, what is it? A bloated civil service with a salary bill rising from \$963.9 million in the 2022-2023 Budget to \$1.3 billion.

We have also seen a rise in vehicle leasing costs from \$20 million in the 2019-2020 Budget to \$42 million today, which is the opposite of what NFP's election promise was, and that was, to engage in ministerial carpooling and cut the wastage by 50 percent. None of that was achieved! In fact, we are seeing a major hike in the cost of vehicle leasing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in just 12 months from April 2024 to April 2025, this Government embarked on 140 overseas trips, spending over \$1.9 million of taxpayers' money. We have every reason to suspect that the actual cost is even greater because limited and selective information was released.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.-Mr. Speaker, Sir, unnecessary commissions and tribunals have been established without clear plans for implementation, all on the back of borrowing. Let us look at the revenue target. The budget projects \$3.9 billion in revenue, but Mr. Speaker, Sir, look at reality – a shrinking tax base, rising cost of doing business, less capital expenditure, and a slowing tourism sector. This projection is a fantasy. So how will they fill the gap? I am worried. Will they sell off State assets or will they sneak in new taxes on already struggling families and businesses?

This Government shows how desperate they are. They are good at repackaging and rebranding FijiFirst projects to give the impression that they are doing something for the taxpayers. And that is why we always talk about microwaving. Let us look at the facts, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The upgrade of informal settlements like Cuvu, Ledrusasa and Waidamudamu, these were FijiFirst initiatives from start to finish. The only thing left was the issuing of the leases. Not even once, was the last government acknowledged when the leases were issued out. It appeared as if it was all done by this government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Housing Authority had already prepared land for the International Finance Corporation (IFC) housing project under the public-private partnership model, yet in the budget, they proudly announced that they will deliver 2,900 residential lots. These lots were already part of FijiFirst's plans for strata apartments which they have now abandoned, despite the honourable Prasad campaigning on a promise to invest \$200 million a year into quality housing by diverting funds from road projects. All of these is on record, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

In digital transformation - what did they do? They took the BizFiji platform, a Fiji First achievement and simply re-launched it under a new name "businessNOWFIJI". Same tool, same system, just a fresh ribbon cutting ceremony. Why? Because this Government was desperate to convince its voters that they were doing something for them, but a government that relies on re-packaging others work, is not leading, it is merely trailing behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we often speak about reform, but reform must be strategic, measurable and grounded in economic reality, not just headlines. Meaningful reforms are urgently needed in our state-owned enterprises. These enterprises should be engines of growth, delivering profits instead of draining taxpayers' money. There is immense potential, yet this Government has failed to give public enterprises the consistent strategic focus they deserve and unfortunately, public enterprises come under the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister has got many other portfolios and therefore justice is not done to public enterprises, and particularly the reforms it needs.

Instead, what we see, are so-called reforms like the re-establishment of the Public Works Department, a move that simply increases the size of the civil service. How can such a reform possibly reduce costs or improve efficiency? Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not smart reform. If you want to know more about smart reforms, let me share the reforms that were undertaken by the Bainimarama government.

The real reform, grounded in sound economic strategy, delivers measurable returns. Under the Bainimarama government, reforms were carefully designed and strategically implemented at Fiji Ports, Fiji Pines, Energy Fiji Limited (EFL), Airports Fiji Limited (AFL), and Fiji Airways, to name just a few.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- These reforms modernised critical infrastructure, improved governance, and brought in private sector expertise where it mattered most. The results speak for themselves: increased trade capacity; an award-winning national airline – and they are the 10th best internationally; record surpluses at AFL before the pandemic and international certifications that made Fiji more competitive on the global stage.

Consider the establishment of Assets Fiji Limited as well, which divested shares while the assets remained under government ownership, as seen at EFL and Fiji Ports. Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are examples of smart, balanced, modern reforms that we need to undertake with state-owned enterprises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister for Finance recently announced a record-high FNPF interest rate of 8.75 percent for 2025, the highest in over three decades. This is a powerful validation of the bold and necessary reforms undertaken by the Bainimarama Government in 2011 and 2012.

At that time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FNPF was facing a deep financial crisis. It was burdened by massive losses from politically influenced and poorly managed projects, including a \$178 million write-down from the failed Momi Bay and Natadola Resort investments. The Fund's future hung in the balance, with members' savings at only \$3 billion and total assets barely reaching \$3.8 billion in 2011. Today, the impact of those reforms is undeniable. Members' funds have grown to an impressive \$8.1 billion, and total assets now exceed \$10.6 billion, more than doubling in just over a decade.

In 2025, FNPF achieved over \$1 billion in investment income, the strongest return in its history. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this remarkable result did not happen by chance. Without those difficult reforms, the FNPF was on the brink of collapse. The decisions taken then were not easy, but they were necessary to restructure an unsustainable pension scheme and safeguard the retirement savings of hardworking Fijians. Today we see the results and they prove the value of reform that is grounded in economic reality and guided by courage, not politics.

Let us move to the young and skilled workers. Mr Speaker, Sir, this Budget is glaringly silent on one of Fiji 's deepest crisis – the plight of unemployed young people and the exodus of skilled workers. Thousands of graduates remain jobless, unable to find opportunities despite years of studying. Around 19,000 private students have lost access to affordable TELS loans and now struggle to fund their studies privately. Many young Fijians cannot even take up overseas jobs because they are bonded or forced to repay loans upfront. Our young people are not living for adventure. They are living out of frustration because this Government has failed to create pathways for opportunities at home.

I do want to acknowledge the Reserve Bank of Fiji team led by the governor for maintaining the overnight policy rate at 0.25 percent from 2020, one of the lowest globally. This has helped shield ordinary Fijians from the steep interest rate hikes seen in countries like Australia and New Zealand and the struggles that it brought to the people of these countries. I also commend the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service team under the leadership of its chief executive officer for achieving strong revenue

collection, but it is deeply disappointing to see those hard-earned funds wasted through reckless and poorly planned spending.

Mr. Speaker, Sir. I also recognise the Permanent Secretary for Finance and his team for preparing the Budget documents. But vision, courage and genuine reform must come from political leadership, and sadly that leadership is missing. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is a sugar rush, as said by honourable Bala. It feels sweet for a moment but offers no nourishment for the nation's future. It fills today's basket but empties tomorrow's pantry. This government borrows, but not to build. Spends, but not to reform. Talks, but fails to deliver.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fijians do not ask for miracles. They ask for stability, security, missing jobs, a lower cost of living and hope that their children will have a better future. Sadly, this Budget delivers none of that. It is for these reasons, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that I cannot support this Budget.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Kumar, we wish you safe travels home. By the way, we do not need the running commentary through the continuing interjections from especially the front bench of both sides. And whilst I respect your rights to express yourselves, you are not in fact helping other Members from hearing, especially in a virtual setting of the intervention that has been carried out. So, I would ask of you please to ease up on your interventions, honourable Members.

Before I call on the next speaker. honourable Members, please join me in welcoming in the gallery my colleague the Speaker of the Parliament of Tuvalu, the honourable Sir Iakoba Italeli and your acting clerk, Ms. Faitotoa Kulene. On behalf of the Parliament of Fiji and people of our beloved nation, it is my distinct privilege to welcome you, honourable Speaker, Sir, to our shores and to this august House. Your presence here today reaffirms enduring bonds of friendship and shared purpose between Tuvalu and Fiji.

We are proud to stand together as Pacific neighbours, linked not only by geography, but by our mutual commitment to democratic values, regional solidarity and the prosperity of our island nations. May your visit be both fruitful and inspiring, and we continue to strengthen our inter-parliamentary relationships celebrate our cultural ties and collaborates towards the future of resilience and unity. *Vinaka vakalevu* and welcome to Fiji.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament, I rise to express my strong support for the 2025-2026 National Budget under the theme “*Building Security, Stability and Prosperity*.” This budget reflects our collective vision and commitment towards a stronger, healthier Fiji, one that places the dignity and wellbeing of our people at the centre of national development.

The Ministry of Health and Medical Services has been allocated \$465.6 million, a strategic increase in funding from the 2024-2025 budgetary allocation. We are grateful for the confidence placed in us to continue strengthening the health system, improving equity and securing better health outcomes for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government should be commended for its focus on prioritising and investing in its greater asset – the workforce. This is more so in a social service sector, where the workforce is the heart of the industry. Without a competent and committed workforce, any plans to provide quality services including healthcare are doomed to fail.

The Ministry is delighted with the 3 percent increase for civil servants and believes that this positive step in ensuring that our workforce is appropriately remunerated for the wonderful work they do each day. Walking on dirt roads through ragged inland terrains, crossing rough seas in fiberglass boats or

or crossing rivers in bamboo rafts in their untiring service to the people of Fiji.

The early post-COVID era was marked by an unprecedented escalation of health workforce exodus that threaten the ability of the health system to deliver healthcare services to our people. The ratio of health worker to patient was severely affected and the impact on our people, if the trend continued unchecked, would have been devastating. The quick responsive actions of the Government in the last two financial years to improve the employment conditions through raising retirement age, salary increases, remunerations for overtime work and other allowances have made an immediate significant impact in stabilising our workforce. This will augur well for the people and communities we diligently serve.

The largest increase in our allocation is for our people, doctors, nurses, allied health workers and corporate support staff who are the backbone of Fiji's health system. The allocation for established staff has increased by \$26.3 million, while that for Government wage earners have increased by \$3.6 million for the next financial year. This investment supports recruitment, rural deployment, retention and training.

We are particularly focused on addressing vacancies in remote health zones, expanding outreach teams and supporting postgraduate in nursing specialised programmes. With this investment comes accountability. Our Ministry is enhancing workforce performance, monitoring and introducing peer-based learning models and strengthening leadership and training for frontline supervisors. A healthy workforce builds a healthy nation.

In January of this year, the Ministry declared a public health outbreak in Fiji of HIV. We now estimate that 7,000 people are living with HIV and the ongoing upward trend is deeply concerning. We are grateful that this Budget allocates \$10 million specifically to contain the spread of HIV. These funds will support expanded testings and counselling sites, especially in high-risk areas, public education and youth engagement campaigns. The phased introduction of needle and syringe programmes align with global best practices.

We also acknowledge the support of our partners, Australia, New Zealand, UNAIDS, WHO, the Kirby Institute and all UN organisations in Fiji who are supporting us in this fight. However, this is not just a health issue. It is also a social and human rights issue. We must break the stigma, empower communities with accurate information and stop discrimination to ensure that everyone, regardless of background, has access to prevention, care and treatment.

Today, I am asking all of us in this august House and those listening into the televised parliamentary sessions to work together and act now before it is too late. Do not discriminate against those with HIV infections but help them and support them to get the care they direly need so that they can continue to be productive members of our community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we welcome the \$5.3 million increase in the Ministry's policy administration budget. The Ministry also supports the critical reform; the removal of "R" or Requisition to Incur Expenditure (RIE), under the direct control of the Permanent Secretary. This shift strengthens oversight, transparency and responsiveness. This should further improve implementation of projects by the allocation of funds on a timely manner. To ensure this reform delivers results:

- (1) all RIE-funded projects will be subject to quarterly reviews;
- (2) new financial and operational dashboards will improve accountability and strengthen monitoring; and
- (3) internal audit will have a standing mandate to track performance.

Modernising Fiji's health laws is a key part of our reform agenda. In this financial year, we are pushing ahead with a review of critical health-related legislations with a number anticipated to be submitted to Cabinet by the end of this calendar year. The legislations under review are the:

- (1) Burial and Cremation Act 1911;
- (2) Public Health Act 1935;
- (3) Radiation Health Act 2009;
- (4) Mental Health Act 2010; and
- (5) Nursing Act 2011.

The Ministry will submit the proposed revision of the Quarantine Act 1964 and the Burial and Cremation Act of 1911 to Cabinet in September 2025. These reforms are essential to ensure that the regulatory foundation of our health system is robust and supports current and future needs and international best practises.

We acknowledge our health partners who are supporting the Ministry in this effort. We also intend to begin in the new financial year and with the support of the Office of the Solicitor-General, the processes for the review of an additional number of legislations, which include the:

- (1) Food Safety Act 2003;
- (2) Tobacco Control Act 2010;
- (3) Tobacco Control Regulations 2012; and
- (4) HIV Act 2011, as well as the establishment of new legislations to cover important health services, such as the medical laboratory services in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addressing partnerships for development, the Coalition Government has established the political and governance environment that has allowed government agencies, like the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, to engage in a meaningful and productive partnership with our partners.

The Ministry of Health has continued to work closely with our major development partners Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Korea, India, China and United Nations (UN) agencies including Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), WHO, World Bank and others who have contributed to strengthening and supporting various areas of our health services. I also wish to acknowledge the Asian Development Bank (ADB), as they are now looking into specifically health apart from infrastructure.

We also acknowledge the continued support and engagement under our development partners coordination programme. In particular, we thank the:

- support of the Australian Government and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) under the Vuvale Partnership towards the CWMH redevelopment project. Government which is progressing well meeting all targets for its deliverables. In addition, the DFAT sponsored renovation works for Vunisea Hospital in Kadavu has commenced and the renovations for Taveuni Hospital will follow soon.
- Duavata Partnership with the New Zealand Government that resulted in sponsored renovations of primary healthcare facilities, including the newly built Dogo Health Centre and the nurse quarters at Momi Nursing Station. The support will now move to the Northern Division with target facilities to be renovated.

- Government of Japan for the new CT scan machine and six ambulances now distributed at our subdivisional hospitals, supporting our patient referral system and reducing our need to outsource this service.
- Korean Government and KOICA for the much-needed renovations at our major health facilities.
- Chinese Government for the support towards the evaluation of our strategic plans that will guide and strengthen our future strategic planning for the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is collaborating closely with the Indian Government that resulted in the signing of the first ever Memorandum of Understanding with the Indian Pharmacopeia. The Ministry will continue in its efforts to prepare for the 100-bed super speciality hospital donated by the Indian Government, as well as work on the agreement to access generic drugs that are available at reduced costs in India.

The Ministry is also engaging closely with the Korean Government and KOICA for the construction of the new National Rehabilitation Hospital in Tamavua in the next three years. Without a stable and transparent government, such fruitful partnerships would not have been possible to establish and sustain.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in October of this year, Fiji will host the 76th World Health Organisation Regional Committee Meeting (RCM) for the Western Pacific and coinciding with the 30th Anniversary of Primary Health Care. This historic event will bring together ministers of health from across the Pacific and Asia along with our international health partners and technical experts.

Hosting the RCM is both a privilege and a responsibility. It gives Fiji a platform to showcase our health leadership within the Pacific, share innovations in climate resilient health systems, reaffirm our commitment to universal health coverage and strengthen partnerships for a healthier region. Our planning is well underway and with the Ministry establishing an inter-agency committee that will address the preparations, security requirements, logistical arrangements, and thematic priorities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on resource utilisations and continuous improvement within the Ministry. The Ministry is aware of its budget utilisation and areas that need strengthening in monitoring and control. For the new financial year, we will address procurement bottlenecks, supply delays, and administrative constraints. The Ministry will implement and strengthen the following processes: closely tracking of monthly expenditure against work plans; regular engagement of divisional leadership team in the budget oversight process; mapping procurement pipelines against delivery milestones; and implementing changes for improvement.

Mr. Speaker Sir, this budget is providing a clear pathway and direction on Government's intent for improving the health service and tackling the health challenges of our time. Every dollar allocated to the Ministry of Health and Medical Services must translate into cleaner clinics, better medicines, empowered health workers and healthier communities. The Ministry is ready for implementation, guided by values of service, equity, accountability and care. We will work tirelessly in partnership with stakeholders, government agencies, our communities we serve, our health partners to ensure that our allocated budget for the new financial year is utilised efficiently and prudently for the benefit of the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker Sir, let me conclude by reaffirming the Ministry's full support for the 2025-2026 Budget and we are proud to play a part in building a secure, stable and prosperous Fiji.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 10.26 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.06 a.m.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, and all those in the gallery, and everyone listening online or watching from the comfort of their home; *ni sa bula vinaka*, a very good morning, *jai sia ram*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank you for allowing me the time for contributing to the 2025-2026 National Budget. Before I delve into these figures and provisions of this Budget, I must address a matter that has struck the very heart of our nation's spirit.

It is a deeply sad day for all the followers of the *Sanatan* faith, not only in Fiji, but across the globe. We have been confronted with an unethical and distressing act of vandalism at the Samabula Shiv Mandir. The sight of the damaged idols is truly heartbreaking and deeply disturbing. This vile act is not just an attack on the place of worship but is an assault on the core principles that define us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have allowed the seed of hatred and division to take root. We must choose a different path. We must choose to listen to the message of love and unity that are at the core of our belief. I was told that another attempt was made at a temple in Savusavu last Saturday. I urge the leaders that we must teach our people in temples and Sunday churches of our core values. To all the members of the *Sanatan* community, I call upon you to remain united.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this brings me to the Budget itself, which at first I must say, “wow”, what a Budget! When you first hear the figures, \$3.9 billion in revenue, new initiative here, increased funding there, you will think someone is handing out candy. It sounds sweet and looks glossy. It is wrapped in fancy announcements and decorated with slogans about prosperity and resilience. But when you bite into it, it is hollow. No core, no weight. Just enough sugar to distract people until the crack is in our society. Like the one we have just witnessed, begin to show.

So, I call this what it is, and what many people have also called it a “candy budget”. Packaged for applause, built for headlines and delivered with a wink but when you open it up in rural Fiji, you will find less water, fewer roads, delayed services and frustration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget says that the Fiji Police Force will get \$240.3 million, an increase of \$13.5 million. It says they will recruit 1000 new officers, bringing the total force to 6550. That is 730 officers per 100,000 people, more than double the global average of 300. Sounds impressive, doesn't it? But let me ask. If you already have doubled the global average, why is crime still rising?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V. NATH.- Budget increase means crime increase, Mr. Speaker, Sir. In January and February 2025, criminal cases jumped by 20 percent. Theft, assault, threats, drug possession, and cyber fraud are all climbing. These are not just statistics. These are break-ins, street robberies, online scams and families living in fear. So, I ask again – do we need more uniform, or do we need proper support to the ones wearing them? Do we need more numbers, or do we need more integrity, more training and more community trust?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, most police officers in Fiji work very hard. They serve with pride. They do their best with very little. In Koronivia, my cousin tells me about the small team of officers who turn a red zone into a green zone. No police posts, no dedicated vehicles, no extra manpower, just guts and commitment. That is what policing should look like and that is what this Budget should support. So, I ask the Government, why has not Koronivia been given a permanent police post? Why are those officers

still borrowing vehicles to respond to calls? I know the honourable Prime Minister will say that he was not informed. Why has Budget not allocated even two more officers to back them up?

We talk about visibility and mobility. But visibility does not come from headcounts, it comes from presence. Mobility does not come from recruitment; it comes from resources. Yes, the Budget includes \$19.5 million to recruit 538 new officers and fill 300 vacant positions. That is over 800 officers added immediately. Good. But where will they go? What tools will they have? What training will they receive?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, yes, \$8.6 million has been approved for salary progression. That is welcome. Officers deserve fair pay and let us be clear, money alone does not fix the broken system. It must be matched with accountability, deployment, and community engagement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, community policing is not a slogan, it is a strategy. It takes time, trust and yes, it takes money. You cannot build relationships with communities if your officers are stretched thin, underpaid, and unsupported. We need to invest in: training that builds integrity and leadership, not just rank; resources for community patrols, not just central command; technology and data systems that help officers respond faster and smarter; and mental health support, because officers face trauma too.

Let me say this clearly. Before we double the size of the force, let us double the support for the officers we already have. Let us build a culture of principles, accountability, and respect—from the top and the ground up. Because numbers do not stop crime. Integrity does, and if we do not fund that, we are just dressing up a broken system with a bigger uniform.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are told that rural and maritime development has received an increase in funding — \$39.3 million this year, up slightly from last year. That sounds promising in the chambers, but walk the village, and the tone changes. People are still waiting for basic services and water tanks promised two years ago, farm roads that turn to mud every rainy season, clinics with no fulltime staff, teachers walk two hours to school because the bridge collapsed in the last cyclone and there is still a lack of visible progress on critical needs like boreholes, rainwater harvesting and home wiring assistance. These names are not just on a procurement list. They are homes, schools, refuge. The fact that some of these centres are operational and not just an oversight. It is a failure of delivery. It is a risk carried by rural communities every time a storm forms off our shores.

This Government has been fortunate. No major cyclone, no significant outbreak and no floods like 2020. They govern in calm weather, just like you manoeuvre your punt in high tide when there is no choppy water, but when we were in government, we faced everything. We acted and we delivered even when money was tight. If this Coalition Government had faced what we did, I dare say this budget would not survive the storm literally or financially.

Disaster preparedness must go ahead of slogans. It must be proactive and not reactive. We need a full risk map of rural and maritime zones. Regional supply depots with food, medicine, and temporary shelter kits. Clear accountability reports on delivery timelines. Proper first responder training in remote areas, not just a hotline that rings but does not answer because if we wait until the storm hits to prepare, then we simply do not deserve to govern.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me now turn to the re-establishment of the Public Works Department. My good friend, I feel sorry for you. The Government says it will speed up infrastructure development.

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. V. NATH.- Thank you.

The Government says that will speed infrastructure development but on the ground delays, poor quality and zero accountability.

I recently visited communities across Naitasiri, Tailevu, and parts of Vanua Levu. The stories were the same – roads half built, drainage systems blocked and ignored, and government buildings deteriorating.

Mr. Speaker, I visited Navua with our honourable Leader of the Opposition. I saw the drains turned into rivers! It should be de-sealed normally, but what we have seen that the drains have turned into rivers where a car can go inside and here is a part that stinks. The honourable Minister admitted that rebuilding PWD will take, up to 16 years; that is not planning.

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. V. NATH.- You are on record, honourable Minister. We asked how many roads were actually built by PWD last year? How many projects were completed on time? Which depots were fully operational? People were promised change, but all they got was a recycled department or recycled problems.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me now turn to river management and flood mitigation because while the Government celebrates the completion of dredging works in places like Ba River, the communities upstream are raising the alarm. Yes, the dredging project removed over 300,000 cubic metres of silt, sand, and gravel from a 3.6 kilometres stretch of the Ba River. Yes, it increased discharge capacity and reduced flood risk for Ba Town, but what about the villages upstream? What about the farmers, fishers, and families who are now saying the water levels have dropped. The fish stocks have declined and the ecosystem is suffering.

Flood prevention must not come with a cost of upstream collapse. In Rewa, the story is similar. Sand extraction and erosion threatening the riverbank, farmlands and the biodiversity. Communities in Muana Village report that the riverbank has eroded by nearly 50 metres over the last decade. That is not just land loss, it is livelihood loss. We need a smarter approach, not just dredge and forget; not just extract and walk away. We can have many things, there are many solutions. You talk to the Opposition.

Mr. Speaker, our rivers serve multiple communities. They are not just drainage channels. They are food sources, transport routes and cultural lifelines. If we dredge without data, extract without consultation and manage without foresight, we will turn flood prevention into rural devastation. So, I urge the House to publish environmental impact assessments for all dredging projects; consult upstream communities before extracting begins; monitor water levels and fish stock post-dredging; and fund erosion control and habitat restoration in affected zones because protecting Ba Town from floods must not mean starving Ba's villages of water and fish. And managing the Rewa riverbanks must not mean losing Rewa's land or biodiversity. Let us stop treating rivers like construction sites. Let us start treating them like a shared ecosystem, because when rivers suffer, everyone downstream pays.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us talk dollars. Total revenue stands at \$3.9 billion, yet we face an \$886 million deficit; the largest peacetime deficit in Fiji's history. That is 6 percent of GDP. The Government says this is acceptable, they call it "investment" but investment only works when you get returns – roads, schools, clinics, power, water.

They introduced zero-rated debt for cooperatives. Tax breaks for renewable energy projects. Higher departure tax, now \$200. Stronger VAT enforcement. But these measures are not trickling down. Traders pocket the VAT cuts; you must have seen what numbers have written. The price of butter and price of baked beans have already gone up. Importers dodge duty changes and consumers pay the same

or more at the shop.

Let me share the quote by Simon Sinek, I quote, “poor leaders sacrifice the people to save the numbers. The great leaders sacrifice numbers to save the people.” Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget sacrifices neither. It is just pretence. Fines and fees now make up more non-tax revenue than ever. That is not compliance, that is squeezing the public to meet quotas. We want growth, not penalties. We ask, what capital projects are tied directly to the deficit? What infrastructure does this \$886 million actually build? How will that repayment affect future social spending?

Right now, this Government is borrowing without direction. If we are not careful, our children will pay for operating costs and roads that never got built. Mr. Speaker, Sir, beyond the eye-watering deficit, the government internal reshuffling of funds suffers further concern. In the 2024-2025 Financial Year, the Ministry of Finance carried out a number of budget redeployments. Check the Government website on May 20th –deployment, as I understand, is meant to cover unforeseen or ad hoc commitment. It presumes that certain budgeted projects will not proceed; that they were either delayed, abandoned, or deemed no longer viable.

Mr Speaker, Sir, if these projects were shelved, what does that say about execution? Isn't that a silent admission of failure to deliver? The government took money allocated for approved project and proposed it for short notice spending. That is not strategy, it is scrambling. Proper planning means committing to deliver. If budget items quietly disappear while replacement spending is rushed through, how can the public trust this government's fiscal discipline?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a responsible government must deliver on its commitment and manage public funds in transparency. How many projects from this budget will be executed? No one knows. While the government scrambles to manage their own budget, it seems they have forgotten the promises that they have buried bedrock on this Coalition. Let us not forget what was offered to the voters. The National Federation campaigned for higher cane price than \$85 - when it will be delivered, no one knows.

Promise was made that a massive \$224 million allocation for new agriculture initiatives and critical free tertiary education with TELS debt forgiveness and the local government's election; abolishment of FICAC and even the embassy in Jerusalem, which is in the pipeline. We have seen many, many promises that has been turned down, and, therefore, I must say that this 'candy budget' is a bold allocation and will not be served.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I, therefore, do not support this Budget.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise in this august House to express my strong support for the 2025-2026 National Budget. Before I proceed any further, let me quickly turn to the honourable Member's comments.

I have noted the comments that he has raised regarding policing. But my simple question to the honourable Member, where was he? What did they do when they were in position to change some of the things that he had raised? Maybe you should direct your question to the honourable Leader of the Opposition, when he was the Minister responsible for policing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget, this Coalition Government is committed to supporting the Police and making sure that our country, Fiji, remains safe and secure. So therefore, this Budget will empower the Ministry of Policing and the Fiji Police Force to accomplish its mission.

Safety and security is the bedrock of national development. It underpins economic growth, sustains social progress and ensures the well-being of every Fijian. Without peace and stability, there is no sustainable development, without strong policing and effective national security institutions, we cannot build public confidence in our collective future. We meet at a time of unprecedented security challenges, both globally and domestically.

The rapid escalation of cyber threats, the scourge of illicit drugs, and the rise of transnational organised crime and the evolving tactics of criminal enterprises, demand decisive leadership and bold investments. This is what this Government is doing. We must act with urgency, vision and unity of purpose.

I commend the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and his team for delivering a comprehensive and strategic budget that responds to the realities of our times today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is an honour to deliver my first budget response as Minister for Policing and to reflect on the strategic allocation for my Ministry and the Fiji Police Force. Earlier this year, the Honourable Prime Minister took a bold and visionary step to establish the Ministry of Policing, a dedicated institution to support the Fiji Police Force through clear policy direction, coordination and good governance. This move signals a new era in law enforcement; a transformation that aligns with our national aspirations for safety, trust and justice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry in accordance with Legal Notice Number 4 of 2025, is mandated to lead, develop, coordinate high quality policies in:

- (1) Policing;
- (2) Drug enforcement and operations;
- (3) Public order; and
- (4) Offender rehabilitation.

Mr. Speaker Sir, under this mandate, the Ministry plays a central role in:

- (1) Developing national policing policies;
- (2) Setting professional standards;
- (3) Issuing strategic guidance; and
- (4) Coordinating inter-ministerial and cross sectoral support to drive policing reforms across the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to fulfil these core functions, the Government has allocated \$3.8 million for the establishment of the Ministry's administrative and policy cadre, comprising of 25 new positions. Thank you! This investment is not merely in personnel, it is a commitment to institutional resilience. It will enable us to strengthen internal capacity, improve policy formulations and delivery, and enhance coordination with the Fiji Police Force at both strategic and operational levels. The acquisition of essential resources and expertise will allow us to deliver effectively on our mandate contributing to a safer and more secure Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry's second core function is the establishment and operationalisation of the Fiji Counter Narcotics Bureau, a National Centre of Excellence for drug enforcement and policy coordination. And the allocation of \$56,250 has been designated for the development of the Counter Narcotics legislation. The Counter Narcotics Bureau will be responsible for designing and implementing national drug policies, intelligence frameworks, enforcement operations and multi sectoral partnerships to disrupt the production, trafficking and abuse of illicit drugs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the gravity of Fiji's drug crisis was laid bare in court during the prosecution involving the seizure of 4.1 tonnes of methamphetamine, one of the largest ever in our region. Let me be clear, illicit drug trafficking, including narcotics methamphetamine and emerging synthetic drugs are not just a law enforcement concern, it is a national emergency, undermining our social fabric, threatening public health and fuelling transnational crimes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this problem demands more than enforcement. It demands a moral awakening. A national security consciousness that sees illicit drugs, not just as a contraband, but as a threat to our families, our identity and our future. When I say national security consciousness, I mean a collective mindset and taking of responsibility across society, from schools to churches, from villages to urban centres where drug abuse and illicit trafficking are not tolerated, not glorified and not hidden. Where every parent, teacher, chief, youth leader, sports coach and social influencer plays their role in prevention. Where silence is no longer complicity and reporting is seen as a civic duty.

To build this national security consciousness, the Ministry is promoting and driving an illicit drug-free Fiji that will involve multi-stakeholder engagement. It is a generational movement, and it will require leadership from the top, supported by active citizenry from below.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must, I say, we must not allow Fiji to be used as a Narco-traffic playground. I say that again, we must not allow Fiji to be used as a Narco-traffic playground! The allocation of \$1.9 million for the operational establishment of the Counter Narcotics Bureau is, therefore, both timely and commendable.

To further enhance our campaign against drugs, the Ministry is finalising a formal bilateral partnership with Indonesia's National Narcotics Agency. This partnership will deliver joint training, personnel exchanges, professional development, and infrastructure support.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has commenced engagement with the United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) to roll out resourcing and institutional capacity-building. These partnerships are crucial in equipping Fiji to mount a comprehensive and sustainable response to the transnational threat posed by the narcotics trade.

The increasing frequency and sophistication of cyber threats, targeting our critical infrastructure across eleven designated sectors, pose significant risks to Fiji's national interest. A major cyber incident would paralyse public services, compromise citizen data, and erode trust in our institutions. The allocation of \$112,500 to support the implementation of a structured and sector-aligned critical infrastructure cybersecurity framework is a critical investment in our national resilience. In line with our cybersecurity and modernisation agenda, the Ministry is committed to building an Artificial Intelligence ecosystem that promotes innovation, inclusion, and safety while safeguarding the rights and dignity of every Fijian.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this opportunity to sincerely thank the Government of Japan and JICA for their partnership in a cybersecurity capacity-building project for Fiji and the Pacific. Furthermore, we are grateful for the assurance of the cybersecurity and law enforcement support provided by the Government of Australia during the honourable Prime Minister's recent official visit. This reflects the growing confidence in Fiji's security sector reforms and our shared interest in a secure and prosperous Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to transform our policing services, we must modernise our legal foundation. The \$56,000 allocation for the Police Act review will facilitate public consultations and a comprehensive analysis of the legislation. Our goal is to restore public trust, align with best practices, and build a policing system that is transparent, accountable, and community focused.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, building public trust in the Fiji Police Force is not just a moral imperative. It is the cornerstone of an effective, legitimate, and accountable security institution. Trust between the police and the people is the currency of public safety, without which, crime prevention, law enforcement, and justice become hollow pursuits. To restore and deepen this trust, the Ministry is advancing a comprehensive transformation agenda built on four interlinked pillars, which are:

- (1) Fiji Police Force modernisation, including good governance principles and respect for human rights.
- (2) Community policing and ethical leadership.
- (3) Intelligence-led operations, effective investigations, and prosecutions.
- (4) Building of a national security consciousness against illicit drugs and other threats.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to win public trust, the police must first be transformed from within. We, with our international partners supporting the budget, are committed to modernising the Fiji Police Force both physically and institutionally. These include:

- (1) Development of a master plan for the new police headquarters that is to be built forward and into the future.
- (2) Digitalisation of the Ministry of Policing and Fiji Police Force.
- (3) Continuous professional development with emphasis on ethical leadership.
- (4) Capacity building for frontline officers.
- (5) Acquisition of modern equipment to support the Force.
- (6) A modern Force is not defined by hardware alone, but by integrity, competency, and compassion of police officers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Police Force is not simply a line item on a balance sheet. It is the living backbone of national resilience. It is the blue thread that weaves together law and order, and most importantly, our citizens' trust. Today, that thread is growing stronger. I commend the allocation of \$240.3 million to the Fiji Police Force, an increase of \$13.5 million from the previous fiscal year. This is a strategic investment in national security.

I also acknowledge and appreciate the Government's consideration of the Fiji Police Force Reform and Restructure Phase 1, announcing 1,076 additional positions. This will be implemented in two phases; the first of which is 538 new positions, in this budget. These additional boots on the ground will boost police presence, visibility, strengthen community engagement and improve crime prevention and response. The \$8.6 million allocated for salary progression is a recognition of professionalism, commitment and sacrifices of our men and women in the force. This investment reaffirms Government's appreciation for their vital role in protecting our nation.

In moving forward, the Fiji Police Force is prioritising enablers to improve operational effectiveness. This includes procuring equipment for information technology, special operations, traffic management, forensic chemistry, as well as the purchase of police boats and engines.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the police are not immune to internal challenges. There are those that cross the line, and let me make it absolutely clear, – there is no place in the force for unethical behaviours. While we speak of bold reforms and visionary strategies, I must also pause to reflect on the internal discipline and integrity that must underpin everything we do. We cannot afford to behave like an unprofessional organisation. The trust of our people is hard earned and easily lost.

There are ongoing court cases involving some officers of the Counter Narcotics Bureau. These incidents, while deeply disappointing, serve as necessary lessons. Let them be turning points, not just for the individuals involved, but for the institution as a whole.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2024, this august House heard of the Police Reset Policy being budgeted as the second phase of Restore Blue General Policy direction issued by the former Minister for Home Affairs. Today, we move forward with a new policy identity - Police Uplift Programme as the independence of the Fiji Police Force has been secured and democratic governance check mechanisms have been set in place.

The Police Uplift Programme is a multi-year initiative aimed at transitioning the Fiji Police Force into a modern, community-centred, professional, and accountable institution. It represents a strategic shift from reactive policing to a proactive, intelligence-led and community-informed policing culture. This programme is aligned with international best practices and is underpinned by the key pillars of effective enforcement, investigation and prosecution, community policing, professional standards, capacity building, digital transformation, gender-responsive policing and human rights-based approaches.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Police Force is not only a domestic security agency, but also a regional peace enabler and global peacekeeper. This is aided by the support from our international partners who have contributed greatly to providing the means of uplifting the Fiji Police Force.

Our recent weeklong trip to Australia with the honourable Prime Minister was very successful and has borne fruit, with the Australian Government agreeing to expanding their support through the Vuvale Partnership in deepening of policing and security ties. This through furthering cooperation across a range of areas that includes enhancing our partnership on transnational crime, with a focus on responding to illicit drugs and opportunities for greater information sharing and surveillance efforts, strengthening policing capability through training and infrastructural development.

As I speak, I welcome the arrival of the Assistant Minister for Pacific Island Affairs, Senator Nita Green and the Assistant Commissioner Pacific from the Australian Federal Police. Their arrival is a testament of the strong cooperation and relationship we have with them.

I also wish to extend my sincere appreciation to our internal partners, particularly the donors, UNDP, UNODC, UNOHCHR and the Government of France who will assist Fiji through training, tailored to Fiji Police priorities and help upgrade drug surveillance equipment.

I also wish to inform this House of the upcoming Security Cooperation Agreement with the Korean National Police Agency, which will focus on training, capacity-building and technical collaboration. The ongoing support of all our partners through targeted police development projects remains crucial in complementing key aspects of this Budget and is deeply valued. Together our collective, our collective effort in policing supports the honourable Prime Minister's vision for the ocean of peace, which aims to foster a peaceful, stable and prosperous Fiji and the region.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, in the interest of national security, national unity and development, I urge. Members of this august House that we refrain from making political rhetorics that causes fear, confusion, and uncertainty to our people. We should stand together to secure and build a better Fiji for all. This budget marks a historical inflexion point for policing and national security in Fiji. It signals a bold shift towards a more coordinated, accountable and forward-looking new enforcement architecture. It underwrites the operationalisation of the new Ministry of Policing, laying the foundation for professional policy and administrative cadre. It drives the establishment of the Fiji Counter Narcotics Bureau, our national shield against the scourge of illicit drugs. Work and capacity building relating to the public order and offender rehabilitation function of the Ministry will pick up momentum in the next fiscal year.

Above all, Mr Speaker, Sir, this budget renews our solemn commitment to restore public trust in the Fiji Police Force, transforming it into a modern ethical, community-rooted institution ready to address the complex and evolving security threats.

Mr Speaker, Sir, I call on the Commissioner of Police and all ranks of the Fiji Police Force to remain firm and steadfast to the call of duty and deliver a safe and secure Fiji for all. Finally, I paid tribute to the dedicated team at the Ministry of Policing and the Fiji Police Force. I also acknowledged the unwavering support of our families, whose sacrifices make our service to the nation possible. Together with resolve and unity of purpose, we move to secure the future of every future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the 2025-2026 Budget and commend it to this honourable Parliament.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition and Members of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today not just as a Member of Parliament but as a son of Ba, Fiji and as a cane farmer. As someone who works the land, lived the hardship and carries the experience this Coalition Government claims to understand. Before we talk numbers, let me speak from memory. When I was a boy in primary school, my parents would give me 20 centres or sometimes more or less before school. That may not seem like much today, but to me it was gold. I would stop at a local shop, buy few sweets, and walk to class with a smile. By lunchtime the sweetness was gone, and I had nothing. Just the fading taste of sugar and an empty stomach.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is exactly how this 2025-2026 Budget feels. It is a candy budget. It looks sweet, sounds generous, but once it is spent, there is nothing left. No structural support, no lasting relief, just fiscal sugar that melts away and leaves the people wanting. The budget headlines may impress, but the households are unimpressed. This is a budget built for political theatre, not everyday survival. It is calibrated to distract; it gives with one hand and quietly takes back with the other.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us not forget the promises of the 2022 General Election. The Coalition Government argued that borrowing during COVID-19 was reckless. They condemned the very policies that kept our country running. Policies they are now trying to claim credit for. Civil servants were paid in full. Our national airline survived, while others collapsed. The very Fiji Airways survived which the honourable Deputy Prime Minister Gavoka used to criticise heavily when he was in Opposition. Businesses were supported, infrastructure continued, and the economy stayed afloat. We delivered and the people knew it. Infrastructure was built. VAT was held at 9 percent and the economy was stimulated for the benefit of households, not headlines.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, then came the 2023-2024 budget, VAT rose to 15 percent – one of the sharpest increases in Fiji's fiscal history and here is the real issue. VAT is charged at every stage from importer to wholesaler to retailer. Businesses are supposed to claim back VAT they pay along the chain, but the price to consumers never falls. It gets baked into the final cost and everyday Fijians foot the bill while businesses keep the profit. This is not relief, it is recycled cost. A taskforce is now being assembled to ensure VAT savings reach the people. Let us call that what it is – forced trickle-down economics.

The Government wants thanks for reducing VAT to 12.5 percent starting in August. They increased it, then dropped it and expect gratitude. That is not tax reform. That is policy backpedaling wrapped in PR. Let me also remind the honourable Minister for Finance the people have heard his blame games. The question today is not what the last government did but what this Government still fails to do.

This is the Coalition Government's third budget. Time for excuses is up. The people of Fiji are not fools and come next year they will have a very clear answer for those who sold them sweets while taking away their staples.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today with deep conviction not as someone reading from a budget brief but as someone who has stood in the cane fields, spoken with mill workers and witnessed the slow dismantling of Fiji's sugar backbone.

Let us be clear, the sugar industry is not an inconvenience tucked away in a ministry. It is a livelihood, a legacy, and a lifeline for thousands of families. And right now, it is being held together with patches not plans.

Lease renewal is one of the most urgent crises facing cane farmers. For many, the question is no longer "how much will I be paid?" It is, "will I even be allowed to plant next season?" Farmers in Seaqaqa, Labasa, and in the Western Division and people who have tilled the same land for decades are being told they may lose that land.

The Government has allocated \$978,200 for lease premium assistance but this covers just a fraction of those affected. The criteria are tight, the number of beneficiaries small and worst of all there is no guarantee this support will continue next year. What are farmers meant to do with that kind of insecurity? You cannot revive sugar on unstable land.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, then there is a matter of the guaranteed cane price. During our government's time, we legislated a fixed price of \$85 per tonne. That was not an estimate. It was policy. It gave farmers confidence. Now, we hear talk of \$85 plus \$20, but is it locked in? Is it legislated or is it just a floating figure in a Minister's speech? Farmers are not asking for politics. They are asking for certainty and not arithmetic games. One clear, guaranteed price. If this Government truly believes in the future of sugar, then put the price in law, protect it, honour it, anything else is guesswork.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, respect for farmers must extend to how decisions are made about them. I raise serious concerns about the Special Committee on Sugar. It is chaired by the Prime Minister includes both Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Minister for Sugar, and the Leader of the Opposition.

On paper that looks bipartisan and reality it is lopsided. One Opposition voice drowned out by five from government ranks is not oversight. It is a quorum designed for agreement, not challenge. And where are the people who actually make sugar happen? Where are the growers, mill workers, lorry drivers, cooperatives, and the agricultural experts? It is a daily grind for thousands who deserve to be inside the decision-making room and not watching from outside.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, revival demands participation. Let this committee reflect the real sector, not just as political managers. Open the doors, invite expertise, let farmers speak for themselves. Farmers face numerous challenges. Despite Government's attempts to give high sugar prices to the growers, the reality on the ground is totally opposite. The hidden costs and the costs of production are also record-breaking and skyrocketing in each new season of harvesting. Associated with this is the high cost of living. Farmers are grappling with how to manage the high cost of living and high cost of cane production.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is sad to see that the ageing and ailing infrastructure, such as cane access roads, bridges and Irish crossings, are still under maintenance in some parts of the country well into the harvesting season. This should have been done during off-season. In Waiqele Sector, Labasa, the tramline bridge is still under maintenance, forcing farmers to cut their cane and lorries at an extra cost. This has sharply cut the income for portable tractor operators.

This is simply a lack of poor planning on the part of FSC and the honourable Minister for Sugar, who professes to be a very passionate sugar cane farmer saviour for the sugar industry, must take responsibility for this. Many small farmers have given up on increasing the cane tonnage because of stray animals damaging sugar cane. Also, cattle are stolen that farmers use in farming, such as ploughing, harrowing and planting. The burning of cane is a major issue grappling the farmers. The honourable Minister is on record saying that he cannot be looking at every little problem of the farmers and insists that growers must take responsibility.

I now turn to the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs, a portfolio that should be the beating heart of our national unity, but in this Budget feels more like an afterthought. The Ministry has been allocated \$6.9 million in the 2025-2026 Budget. That is less than 9 percent of the Ministry's total envelope, and a fraction of what is needed to meaningfully support Fiji's multi-ethnic communities. Yes, there is \$2 million for ethnic grants to community-based organisations, \$490,000 for the Lautoka Multicultural Centre, and \$900,000 for gas-fired cremators. These are welcomed, but not enough.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, where is the funding for the religious site protection? Where is the support for interfaith dialogue, trauma recovery and community reconciliation? After the desecration of the Samabula Shiv Mandir, our people are not just grieving, they are worried and afraid. This budget offers no reassurance, no dedicated fund for temple security, no restoration grant, no outreach to rebuild trust.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister has spoken of social cohesion, but cohesion cannot be built on cosmetic grants and photo opportunities. This must be built on safety, dignity, and equal respect for all faiths. When sacred spaces are violated, the Government must respond, not just with recommendations, but with concrete support.

This budget should have included religious site protection funds, restoration and trauma grants, interfaith unity programmes to promote peace building and youth engagement. Without these measures, the Ministry risks becoming a symbolic office, not a strategic one, and the communities it claims to serve will continue to feel neglected.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this budget is dressed in sweet promises, but peel back the packaging and you will find it is hollow. They reduce VAT from 15 percent to 12.5 percent and expect applause, but who raised it to 15 percent in the first place? This Government. They inflicted the pain and now they offer partial relief, expecting gratitude for undoing their own damage. That is not fiscal responsibility. That is policy whiplash.

They talk about concessions and discounts, but many seniors have quietly lost support. Their new eligibility rules have pushed away thousands who previously qualified. They have talked about it before, and we remain concerned. They speak about health and infrastructure, yet the roads in Fiji remain cratered. Clinics are understocked. Water continues to run dry in settlements across Fiji.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Hogwash.

HON. V. PILLAY.- The promises are loud. The results are quiet.

This is not a development budget, it is a distraction budge - a budget built to headline, not to help, a budget that gives with one hand and takes with another.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us talk about the deficit. This budget carries a projected shortfall of \$886 million. This is the largest peacetime deficit in Fiji's history. During the last election campaign, some Members of the Government side, then in Opposition, actually calculated how much each Fiji resident will have to pay for their share of Government debt.

Now that the Government debt has increased, do the same. Calculate and inform the public how much they will have to pay now. We are not rebuilding after a cyclone. We are not recovering from COVID-19. We are not at war. Yet, this Government is borrowing at emergency levels without emergency results. Deficit spending is a tool, but it must be a tool used with discipline, direction and delivery. Right now, we see none of those things.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are not against deficit, but we are against debt that vanishes into mismanagement. We are not against ambition, but ambition must be met with execution. We are not against big budgets, but big budgets must build something big. This budget is expensive but not expanding. It is loud, but not lasting. After all the sugar melts away, it is the people who will be left paying the bill for promises that were never real. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I speak for the people of Fiji and they are not fooled. They told me, “the roads are still full of potholes, the prices of rice and oil is still high. We hear big words in Suva, but nothing changes for our rural communities.”

They remember when things were better, when support was simple, when help was real, when promises were kept and when people's needs were attended first. This Government has gaslighted the people of Fiji. They have made them forget what fairness looked like, but the people are waking up. They are asking questions, they are demanding answers, and they are not afraid anymore. They are tired of being told to be grateful for less, tired of being told that things are improving when their lives say otherwise.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we in the Opposition are not here to make empty calls. We are here to ask the hard questions, questions that the Coalition Government is too afraid to answer. To the Minister for Sugar; where is the money to back up the \$105 per tonne? Why is the stabilisation fund underfunded? Why is there no money for mill upgrades or tramline restoration? Are you misleading the farmers, or are you planning to disappoint them later?

To the honourable Minister for Finance; why did you raise VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent? Hurt the people and now bring it down to 12.5 percent and expect gratitude. Do you think the people of Fiji are fools? This is not leadership, this is manipulation. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we in Opposition simply want good governance, good service delivery, better health facilities, a vibrant sugar industry, a community free of crimes and violence.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, Members of Parliament, fellow citizens in the gallery, those watching from home or through live streaming, *ni bula nakwa* and a very good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to commend the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning and National Development and Statistics for the visionary 2025-2026 National Budget, which lays a strong foundation for national stability and resilience.

Before I proceed further, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to pay tribute to the former Minister for Agriculture and Waterways, honourable Vatimi Rayalu who was a visionary leader and whose mission in the Ministry was rooted not in power, but in purpose, and whose legacy was not defined in policies, but in his unwavering commitment in transforming the agriculture sector.

I would also like to take this time to congratulate *Na Turaga Bale na Tui Nayau, Sau ni Vanua o Lau* and his people for a smooth and successful installation.

I also congratulate honourable Kuridrani for his re-entry into this Parliament. The 2025-2026 National Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a practical, forward-leaning and compassionate Budget. A Budget

with a clear mission to improve lives, expand opportunity and prepare our nation for the future. It is grounded in the powerful theme, building security, stability and prosperity. That is exactly what this Budget delivers. The stability for economy, jobs, rule of law and prosperity for families, businesses and for future generations.

This is not a budget of giveaways, or an election budget or a lollipop budget as stated by the other side of the House. It is the people's budget. A budget of purpose, of planning and of principal investment. It is about safeguarding our nation today while building the foundations of a stronger Fiji tomorrow. Mr. Speaker, Sir, our debt-to-GDP ratio, once escalating above 90 percent, has now been brought under 80 percent through fiscal discipline. The Coalition Government has stabilised the economy we inherited, not worsened it. The rising cost of living continues to be one of the most urgent challenges facing our families. The Coalition Government has responded with compassion, decisiveness and a clear plan.

The reduction of VAT from 15 percent to 12.5 percent, alongside the continuation of zero-rated VAT on 22 essential food and household items will provide over \$500 million in direct tax relief to our people. These fiscal measures are not only timely, they are targeted. Combined with expanded social welfare assistance, transport subsidies and increased support for farmers and leaseholders, reflect the Government's unwavering commitment to easing the burden on our most vulnerable and ensuring that no Fijian is left behind. It means to build security in the home, stability in the economy and prosperity for every Fijian.

Our response to the cost-of-living crisis is not confined to tax reform alone. The 2025-2026 National Budget delivers a comprehensive and people-focused relief package, tackling not just the symptoms, but the root pressures our families face.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, households with \$30,000 in income will receive a fully subsidised access to water, electricity and essential medicines. This consolidated support is a direct investment in household dignity and wellbeing, ensuring that no family is forced to choose between the basics of life. Public transport affordability is also being addressed. Fijians will now pay 10 percent less for bus fares while operators will continue to receive the full regulated rates, an approach that balances relief for commuters with sustainability for service providers. This will benefit thousands of workers, students and market vendors who rely on buses daily.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, education remains at the heart of this Coalition Government's mission to create a more just and inclusive society. That is why the \$200 Back-to-School support for every eligible student will continue, ensuring that no child is left behind because of financial hardship. To ensure that every community feels safer and more secure, the Fiji Police Force will expand by another 1,000 officers. This significant investment in law enforcement aims to improve response times, deter crime and strengthen community policy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are not isolated measures. They are part of a clear, compassionate and coordinated approach to restoring stability in every household and reinforcing trust in public service. When we say no Fijians will be left behind, we mean it. Through this Budget, we are putting those words into action.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Local Government welcomes the \$34.7 allocated to our portfolio. This allocation will directly support our strategic priorities, strengthening municipal infrastructure, developing new towns, build climate resilience, improve waste management and restore democratic representation in our municipal councils.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a major milestone for the ministry and indeed for our democratic journey is the progress made toward restoring Local Government elections. The support from the International

Foundation for Electoral Systems and International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance and following broad based consultations with political parties we have successfully completed amendments to the Local Government Act 1972 and was passed by Parliament in November 2023. A governed regulation to support implementations under the Electoral Act are now being finalised by the Office of the Solicitor-General.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I must take a moment to correct a misleading claim made by honourable Parveen Bala in this august Parliament. This is the same honourable Bala that made a public statement in September 2014, saying that his immediate task was to hold the municipal elections, but this never happened. And again in 2018, he said and I quote, "...processes have to be followed and it is not for someone to say from outside why municipal elections are not being held." He also stated he will complete the review process of the Local Government Act 1972. Unfortunately he cannot deliver his promises.

It is factually incorrect, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that he said the Coalition Government is hiding the funds somewhere. The Fijian Elections Office is an independent and constitutional body responsible for conducting all elections in this country, including municipal elections. The Ministry holds funds for logistics support that is essential for preparation and coordination with the Fijian Elections Office. Logistics involved civic awareness, communication with councillors, administrative preparations and other groundwork necessary to facilitate a smooth electoral process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$538,000 provided in this Budget is operational. It reflects our readiness, our commitment and our accelerated oriented approach to restoring a democratic representation of towns and cities. In the current financial year is a market for essence for local economies. The Ministry proudly delivered the three new municipal markets - Nakasi, Levuka and Savusavu. These markets support women, persons and with disabilities, farmers and small fish vendors who are the everyday heroes of our informal economy. We welcome the \$335,500 allocated for upgrades to the Rakiraki Market including a new MSME floor to boost economic participation and innovation at the local level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for far too long, vendors in Seaqqa, many of them are women, farmers and micro entrepreneurs have worked in challenging and undignified conditions. They never gave up. Now we are giving back what they deserve. To get \$1.7 million investment by this Government, the new Seaqqa Market will become a vibrant centre for economic and social activity. It will provide space for 50 vendors, dedicated areas for fresh produce, *yaqona*, handicraft and a hygienic climate resilient fish market. Joining the bus terminal, secure vendor parking, administrative office and landscape public spaces will reshape Seaqqa into a modern connected township that truly serves its people and surrounding communities. I am pleased to inform this august House that the SEG 7 (PAC) confirmation have been completed and construction is set to begin this month with completion by the end of the next financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government has endorsed the Western Division Landfill project. A flagship initiative with \$2.5 million allocated for the remediation of dumpsites in Sigatoka, Lautoka, Ba and Rakiraki. Working with the UNDP, ADB and the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, we are designing a modern engineered landfill with capacity for recycling, future treatment as safe waste segregation. The remediation project has received equal support from the UNDP under the Coral Reefs project. In parallel JICA's supported on the Solid Waste Master Plan under J-PRISM III initiative will promote the 310 approach across all municipalities. This budget further allocates \$590,000 for rural local authorities, \$3.2 million for waste collection subsidies and \$1.5 million for garbage trucks for small municipalities.

I am also pleased to report progress on two stall projects, the Lautoka Swimming Pool. Under the previous government who oversight delayed these much-needed facilities disappointing the people of

Lautoka. With this budget support of \$1.9 million for the swimming pool, we are completing the projects restoring public trust and creating vibrant community spaces for health, recreation and youth engagement.

The Ba Stadium or Govind Park is nearing completion of Phase 2 and we expect to open before the beginning of the new financial year. Ba will be able to host day matches and there are already talks to host IDC Soccer Tournament this year. There is also talks with the CEO for the Drua who will have a trial games at the Govind Park in Ba.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on urban development and infrastructure resilience, this budget reaffirms our commitment to resilient and inclusive urban development one that responds to the needs of both our growing towns and our undeserved rural communities. The development of new towns in Nabouwalu, Keiyasi and Seaqqa is backed by \$4.8 million allocation with civil works already underway and further planning support set to expand into the rural growth centres. I am also pleased to announce that Nabouwalu Passenger Terminal Services Building is nearing in completion and is scheduled for commissioning in the coming weeks.

On the Master Plan for the greater Suva, Nadi and Lautoka, there is an allocation of \$1.96 million. A dedicated subcommittee has been established to oversee its implementation led by myself and comprise key ministers, the planning for our children's future not just for the coming election.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the building and construction sector is one of Fiji's most resilient and fast growing economic engines. The Department of Town and Country Planning has over the past two years alone approved major projects totalling an impressive \$1.5 billion nationwide. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2022-2023 financial year the Western Division alone recorded development approvals worth \$559 million headlined by the landmark \$122 million Naisoso Island Resort, an iconic addition to our tourism landscape by symbol of strong investment confidence. Private investment accounted for 63 percent of construction activity in that area driven largely by growth in tourism, commercial development and industrial expansion in the private sector putting its faith and its capital into Fiji's future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, by 2023-2024, momentum only intensified with concerns rising to \$623 million. Six months this year, January to June 2025, over \$322,381,375 million worth of development approvals have been granted which equates to 52 percent of the total last year. Mr. Speaker, Sir, a major reform on this budget and a building permit approval system known as BPAS, a digitized building permit system that enhances transparency, reduces processing time, enables real-time tracking of applications. Changes are underway to support enlargement, signatures and recognition of qualified persons.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Minister for Housing, I also wish to extend my sincere appreciation to honourable Minister for Finance for allocating \$31.8 million to the Ministry of Housing. This funding will enable the Ministry to scale up critical infrastructure development initiatives that support socio-economic growth, enhance service delivery, contribute meaningfully to sustainable and inclusive development across the country.

The development of the new national development plan has provided a pathway to formulate actionable policies and strategies. This has led to the successful completion of the new National Housing Policy 2025-2030.

With a \$22,000 fund allocation, the Ministry will continue to work on the review of the Development of Informal Settlements Act 2022, Informal Settlement Upgrading Programme, Lot Allocation Policy, First Home Ownership Policy, and many more, that align with our national priorities and international commitments while also addressing gaps, adapting to development context and enhancing implementation and delivery.

I am also proud to announce that recently, the Ministry has embarked on a digital platform for the First Home Ownership Initiative. The digitisation of this grant programme is the first to be done since its inception in 2014. Embarking on this new digital era will now provide more streamlined and efficient processes, as we move away from traditional paper-based method. Over 4,000 families have already benefited from this initiative, with total payouts exceeding \$55.7 million. Now, with our new digitised First Home Ownership Portal, applying through various financial institutions is easier than ever, bringing faster service and greater efficiency to even more aspiring first home owners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Premila Kumar stated this morning that this is like a repackaged product. It is, however, unfortunate that they just talked about it in 2014 but there was no work done on this digitalisation system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this new financial year, First Home Ownership has been allocated a total of \$3.5 million. This is going to benefit those people who are first home owners who like to buy their houses, buy land, or also build or construct their houses.

The Ministry will also continue to assist those who are affected by fire. Housing assistance for fire victims will continue and the Ministry has been allocated \$244,565 in the new financial year. Similarly, for those living with disabilities, the Ministry has been allocated \$293,478.

For the Formalisation of Informal Settlements, the Ministry has been allocated \$14,640,605 for the six ongoing projects in Tavela, Nadi; Tore, Lautoka; Field 40, Lautoka; and Sakoca, Nasinu; along with two new sites - Valewaquyaya in Ba and Vunika in Labasa. There will be four new project sites that will commence construction in the new financial year - Delaisaweni in Lautoka, Lovu Seaside in Lautoka, Nabare in Lautoka, as well as Caubati in Nasinu.

The Public Rental Board (PRB) also received \$2.9 million. The \$1 million will cater for subsidy grant, while \$1.9 million for the construction of 24 units at the Jittu Estate Redevelopment Project.

On Revitalising Informal Settlements and Environment (RISE), the Ministry has been allocated \$704,348 to continue delivering essential water, sanitation and hygiene services in targeted informal settlements.

The Housing Authority has been allocated \$185,000 and \$157,000 to cater for the consultancy works for Veikoba New Subdivision in the coming year.

Also, the Ministry will continue to refund monies for those who had invested for housing through the Pacific Community Network and in this financial year, we have been allocated \$50,000.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget tackles the real challenges our people face with the rising cost of living, the need for decent infrastructure, safer communities, cleaner towns, better services and more equitable growth. As Minister for Housing and Local Government, I reaffirm my full support for this Budget. *Vinaka vakalevu* and may God bless Fiji.

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; before I proceed with my contribution towards the 2025-2026 National Budget debate, I wish to join my fellow Members of this House in condemning the appalling act of religious sacrilege that occurred at the Samabula Shiva Mandir. Such an act is not only offensive, but also absolutely unacceptable in the Fiji we are all striving to build today - a nation founded on respect, unity and freedom of belief.

Every Fijian has the right to practice their own faith without fear or intimidation. Religious intolerance has no place in our society. Let us be clear, this act does not reflect the values of our people. It is the work of a few disgraceful elements who aim to divide us and weaken the fabric of our diverse and tightly woven society – but they will not succeed. We, as Fijians, stand united, regardless of our ethnicity, religion or cultural background. We are one people. In times of adversity, we rise together, shoulder to shoulder.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge the Government and relevant authorities to treat this matter with utmost seriousness. The perpetrator of this heinous act must be brought to justice without delay. Bail should not be granted and the judicial process should be expedited. Full extent of the law must be applied, and a very strong message should be sent to these thugs. Fiji will not tolerate the acts that threaten our unity and mutual respect. Let this be an example to all that in Fiji, we protect and uphold the dignity of every religion, and we will not allow anyone to tear us apart.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute towards the 2025-2026 National Budget, which represents a carefully crafted, forward-thinking plan for Fiji's economic resilience in a rapidly changing global environment. The Government has presented a budget that not only responds to the immediate economic challenges posed by the global downturn, but also lays foundation for sustainable growth in the long term.

Let me start by acknowledging the reality of our global economic outlook, an outlook that remains subdued with geographical tensions, financial volatility and climate-related challenges, weighing heavily on the global growth.

As highlighted in the Budget, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has revised the global forecast to 2.8 percent in 2025, far below the historical average. This is a clear indication that we are operating in an environment of uncertainty and risk. The impact of this global slowdown, especially from the key trading partners and tourism markets, presents a clear downside risk to our domestic economy. However, while these global headwinds are undeniable, we must also recognise the measures this Government is taking to mitigate their effects and provide relief to our people. This Government's focus remains firmly on the welfare of Fijians, especially the most vulnerable, while maintaining a vision of long-term economic stability and prosperity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in response to the economic uncertainties, this Government has adopted a counter-cyclical fiscal approach. This Budget delivers immediate relief to the vulnerable households through a reduction of VAT from 15 percent to 12.5 percent. This alone will provide an estimated \$250 million in savings to our people. Importantly, the Government has kept essential items, including food and basic household staples at zero or reduced duties. These actions will directly benefit the cost of living, particularly for our low-income families.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is also important to recognise that this Government's investments in people is not just about financial relief, it is about enhancing the quality of life and service delivery to all Fijians. The 3 percent pay increase for civil servants is well deserved. This is a recognition of their tireless efforts, especially in these challenging times. This adjustment will ensure that those who are on the frontlines of public service - educators, healthcare workers and police officers, are fairly compensated and motivated to continue delivering high quality services to our communities.

There are some who will continue to belittle this increment. As for them, 3 percent means nothing with their hefty salaries and beefed up perks which they get. However, for ordinary Fijians, it means putting more bread on the table, better facilities for their families and, ultimately, a better standard of living.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the 2025-2026 National Budget, the Government has continued to prioritise the allocation for primary industries. The Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways has seen an increase of \$17 million in its allocation, taking it to \$115 million. This increase in commitment highlights a significant step towards the country's development, especially in the agriculture sector.

As an agricultural economy, the pulse of Fiji's economic wellbeing is deeply tied to its ability to effectively utilise and invest in agriculture. This Government's funded allocation of resources to this critical sector demonstrates a clear understanding of the vital role agriculture plays in both the nation's food security and its broader economic resilience.

I would like to commend the Government for its ongoing support, particularly in its increased investment in the agriculture sector. Whilst investment in the agriculture sector has been at an unprecedented level, there remains several areas that require further attention and enhancements for the continued prosperity of Fiji's agricultural community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I call for an increased support to the Fertilizer and Weedicide Subsidy for farmers. The allocation of \$1 million to subsidise fertilizer and weedicides for key crops such as *dalo*, cassava, ginger and vegetables, is an essential step in alleviating some of the financial pressures on our farmers.

The rising costs of farm inputs, including fertilizers and pesticides have been an immense burden on our local farmers, particularly in the vegetable sector. As it stands, the \$1 million allocation for the subsidy is insufficient to address the challenges that vegetable farmers are facing. These farmers are struggling to keep up with increasing costs of production, including inputs, labour and transportation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, vegetable farming, which supports many rural communities and provides vital food security, is becoming unsustainable under the current financial model. A significant increase in the Fertilizer and Weedicide Subsidy is urgently needed to support these farmers in maintaining their production.

It is important to acknowledge that rising input costs are not merely a temporary issue, but a long term challenge that will require continued and enhanced financial support. I urge the Government to consider increasing the subsidy allocation for fertilizers and weedicide, particularly for vegetable farmers, to ensure that they are not driven out of business due to financial constraints.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, greater investment in support for women in agriculture is needed. The allocation of \$337,000 for the Women in Agriculture Programme is a commendable effort to empower women in the agricultural sector. Women play a crucial role in Fiji's agricultural activities, particularly in rural areas where they contribute to crop cultivation, livestock management and food security. This allocation recognises the immense contribution of women in the sector. However, it is important to stress that this allocation remains insufficient, given the scale of women contribution and opportunities available for further empowerment.

To encourage more women to take up leadership roles in the sector, I request that Government consider significantly increasing the allocation to the Women in Agriculture Programme. This increase will provide opportunities for training, development and capacity building, enabling women to take their rightful place as key drivers of economic growth in the agriculture sector. Investing in women's empowerment is not just a moral imperative, it is an economic strategy that will yield long-term benefits for the entire nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg for enhanced support to the dairy industry. The allocation for the dairy industry has decreased from \$4 million to \$2.93 million in the 2025-2026 Budget. This reduction is

concerning, given the challenges faced by the dairy sector. The dairy industry, like many other sectors in agriculture, is grappling with rising costs associated with feed, drugs, labour and operational expenses. Additionally, the farm gate milk price paid to the dairy farmers is not sufficient to cover the escalating cost of production.

At this critical juncture, the dairy industry requires substantial Government assistance to remain viable. In particular, there is a pressing need to address the lack of investment in improving genetics in the dairy cattle. Without infusing new genetics into the industry, productivity will continue to stagnate and the overall competitiveness of the sector will decline. Furthermore, lack of adequate support to the dairy farmers may lead to reduction in local meat production, which would have negative consequences for both food security and the economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge the Government to strongly consider reallocating funds to the dairy sector, particularly in terms of addressing challenges of rising costs. An increase in the budgetary allocation to \$5 million should provide necessary support to help farmers cope with the increasing cost of production and support initiatives to modernise the dairy industry. Such an investment would ensure the continued growth and sustainability of the sector, ultimately benefitting not only the farmers, but also the broader economy and consumers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the importance of traditional and native crops in Fiji cannot be overstated. These crops, such as yam, taro and cassava, have proven to be resilient to extreme weather events, including cyclones and floods. They are also a crucial source of food security during times of crisis. Yet, traditional crops often do not receive the same level of attention and investment as other high-value crops. The Government's current focus on high-value crops is commendable, but there is an urgent need to increase support for the cultivation and preservation of traditional and native crops.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the agricultural sector's resilience to natural disasters is largely dependent on the widespread availability of these crops. In times of disaster, these crops serve as a vital source of food for our communities, particularly in rural and remote areas. Investing in traditional crops not only ensures food security in times of need, but also supports the cultural heritage of our nation. These crops are often passed down through generations, and their cultivation plays an important role in preserving Fiji's agricultural history.

I urge the Government to allocate more resources to the promotion and cultivation of traditional and native crops. In doing so, the Government will continue to contribute to strengthening food security, resilience to climate change, and the preservation of agricultural heritage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the issue of theft, in general, is a growing concern. The agricultural sector is not immune to this. Reports of rootcrop theft, livestock theft, even standing crops thefts, such as *yaqona* and *dalo*, have become increasingly frequent. Just recently, a farmer from Deepwater, Tailevu, reached out to inform me that things have been stolen from the farm. This is not only to this Government, it has been happening, and we need to put measures to stop this. This growing sense of insecurity is damaging to the farming community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that not only leads to financial losses for our farmers, but also undermine the morale of the agricultural community. Without proper security, farmers might choose to scale down or abandon their operations altogether, which would have dire consequences for food production and supply in Fiji. The Government's role in ensuring the safety and security of farmers cannot be overstated. Without a safe environment in which we work, farmers may be deterred from investing in the operations. Whilst Government has provided additional resources to increase the force by another thousand officers, I implore the Government to allocate more resources to combat theft in the agricultural sector.

Having said all these, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2025-2026 National Budget is a balanced approach that not only addresses the immediate needs of Fijians facing cost of living pressures but also positions Fiji on a trajectory of inclusiveness, resilience and resilient growth. The Government's fiscal response through measures such as VAT reduction, subsidies, civil servants wage increase and other investments in education and public safety, will help shield our people from the worst of global economic turbulence. While the Government remains mindful of challenges ahead, it is also committed to shaping the future that offers opportunities to all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's agricultural sector remains the backbone of Fiji's economy, supporting the livelihoods of thousands of Fijians and contributing significantly to national food security. The Government's recognition of the sector's importance through increased budgetary allocation is a commendable step towards ensuring the continued growth and sustainability of this vital industry. However, as mentioned earlier, there are still critical areas that need more attention and support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the Government for its continued commitment to the agricultural sector, and I hope that the given suggestions are considered to further enhance the support provided to our farmers. With right investments and policies, Fiji can build a stronger and more resilient agricultural sector that will continue to feed the nation and drive economic growth in years to come.

Just digressing a little bit, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it appears that some honourable Members have developed the tendency to exaggerate issues. A recent press release about the increase in price of Rewa butter is a case in point. The Member in question has levelled accusations against the Government via the Commerce Commission, questioning why the price of Rewa butter has increased, while the price paid to local dairy farmers for raw milk has remained stable.

With due respect, I would urge the honourable Member to take time to understand the subject properly and conduct further research before making such accusation in the House. Firstly, Fiji Dairy Limited is a privately owned company. It made a submission to Commerce Commission, following which the butter price was reviewed and adjusted. If the honourable Member is unsure about when and how Fiji Dairy Limited was acquired by this private entity, I suggest he consult the records from his own government's term.

Secondly, for the Member's information, Rewa butter consumed in Fiji is not made from locally sourced milk. It is imported from New Zealand, processed and re-packed locally. Like any other imported commodity (I am sure he knows about importing), if the international purchase price increases, the local retail price inevitably follows. I am confident that the honourable Member is well aware of this basic economic principle.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is my brief and response. If the honourable Member seeks more detailed explanation, I encourage him to speak with all the relevant stakeholders, do his homework, and then engage in political debate which is grounded in facts, not assumptions.

Finally Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget reflects Government's collective responsibility to support each other during these turbulent times and to keep its eyes fixed firmly on the bright and prosperous future for all Fijians. Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank honourable Sachida Nand for his contribution. Before I call on the next speaker, the honourable Ritesh Sharma, I must apologise to him calling 'Mr. Sachida Nand' to speak ahead of him in the Batting Order. Honourable Nand had requested if he could be allowed to speak ahead of him, as he is in great pain from a fall he suffered yesterday. I acknowledged that he was in bed yesterday, he was recovering from that fall and he had made a special effort to come today to deliver his response to enable him go back and rest. I hope honourable Sharma will accept the explanation of my

decision.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Opposition Members and Independent Members, people in the gallery and those thousand Fijians tuned in; *ni sa bula, namaste* and *salam alaikum* and a very good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I start on the Budget Estimates, I will quickly like to share a few things that is necessary in Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the residents of Qalitu, Buabua, with the Fiji Police Force for their efforts to search a missing lady who was 63 years of age and I managed to join them in the search last week. I got information and handed it over to one of the Ministers in Government to help our Forces find the missing person among the risky and rough terrain.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the true heroes are the residents who took their time out. Fortunately, she was found yesterday. Unfortunately, she is no longer here with us, and I will be visiting for the prayers when I returned to the Western Division.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to pay my final tribute to our former Minister for Agriculture, the late Vatimi Rayalu. His commitment and dedication will always be remembered and may his soul always rest in peace.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I strongly condemn the breaking into a temple and vandalising sacred idols. Such acts of disrespect and intolerance is threatening our communal harmony and cultural heritage, and at the same time, we need to ensure security measures are placed in our temples, going forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, turning to this Budget, I do not know what the honourable Minister for Finance is. Is he a better economist or is he a better politician? Let us find out. I can see that he is going through the Standing Orders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, going through this Budget Estimates, the Public Works budget has been given \$800.1 million. Yes, I understand roads have remained an issue for decades and the honourable Minister for Public Works is on the job. I would like to thank honourable Tuinaceva for the updates he provided on the funding and forecasted operations for Land Transport Authority (LTA) in going forward. The LTA needs to be conducting drug tests, carbon checks and conducting night patrols. We need deeper cohesion to exist with the City Council, National Fire Authority and the Fiji Police Force, and for every LTA Officer or Police Officer who books a vehicle on the road must have a body camera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, speaking of Water Authority of Fiji (WAF), it has been given a \$284.4 million. There has been water cutting and water disruption issues which people are facing, and I urge the people to continue sending me their concerns because I flick it over to the honourable Minister for Public Works and he is a minister who always responds.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the Ministry of Agriculture, I thank them for the allocation of over \$300,000 to combat the issue of stray dogs and they look forward to work closely with the organisations that exist in Fiji. I would like to thank everyone involved in saving a case that came up on social media. The dog's name was Romeo. I thank Animals Fiji and their expertise, the doctors, who were able to save his life.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I turn my attention to climate change. I thank the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence and the honourable Minister for Climate Change, who led Fiji's ratification of the BBNJ Treaty. I also thank his Permanent Secretary for Climate Change who is seen driving efforts

of Anti-Litter Programme, ensuring our environment is safe and clean.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, talking on Ministry of Education, I urge the Government to monitor the \$200 Back to School grant as we have heard stories of how these funds are utilised in other means and not for the children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, speaking of the Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service (TSLS), I have six cases where basically six students have approached me. I could only have six in my 20 minutes speech, of their concerns with the TSLS portal and if the honourable Minister can take these matters forward to solving them.

Case 1 is a TSLS student expresses her concern that the recent allowance increase from \$1,500 to \$1,600 per semester is insufficient.

Case 2 is where a student said he missed the TELS cut-off mark for commerce by five marks. But despite explaining the impact of illness during the exams, he was denied TELS support and he feels that that is unfair treatment.

Case 3 is where another student brings the issue of a merit-based and non-merit-based scholarship recipients that shows that merit-based students have received \$800 on an annual increase - \$400 per semester, and non-merit students have only received \$200 annual increase which is \$100 per semester. The high cost of living and survival is difficult.

Case 4 is where another student bonded to work in Fiji feels that their constitutional rights are being violated because they were not properly consulted or informed about the bonds they signed. The lack of clear communication and consultation regarding bond term is viewed as unfair. This is coming from them.

Case 5 is where a student under the Hardship Assistance Scheme receives only \$1,000 per semester and they feel like the Scheme stagnant support is inadequate to meet the rising cost and financial needs. "Some of my friends are surviving on wheatbix and milk on a daily basis."

Case 6 is where a student says, "I have been accepted into a 4-year Bachelor of Medicine Programme but I am facing difficulties in paying my tuition fees because I had applied for TELS before, I studied something else, and now my application was declined because I have outstanding bond". What she is suggesting is that if she would appreciate if this amount could be added to her existing bond and the entire repayment is done after she finishes her Bachelor of Medicine and after she finds employment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the last case is where a student says that the TSLS portal does not show how much money is owed and the portal is quite slow. Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is something that I want to put forward to the Government and I do not know why honourable Tabuya is mumbling.

The Coalition Government likes to boast about writing off the debt but has failed to address the internal issues faced by the youth of Fiji. Debt is paid off but it is in a bond. However, if a student takes out a loan to get an education, it is a good thing because it becomes the responsibility of the student to pay it off. Being responsible is a good virtue to instil in our youth but the loan payoff scheme needs to be flexible and needs to address the current challenges faced by our youth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I guess when we come into government we have to clean up this mess that they have created.

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, speaking of brain-drain, it was stated in the media yesterday that 40,000 people have left for various reasons, and was also alluded by the honourable Leader of Opposition, between 2023 to 2024. More than 700 companies are applying for permits to get foreign workers, so 6,460 permits were issued as of August 2023 between January 2025.

The level of brain-drain, Mr. Speaker, Sir, depicts the level of confidence you have in your government.

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

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, speaking of foreign workers, we need to closely monitor the exploitation of our foreign workers. There has been cases coming up of the exploitation of their hours and their pay. One thing I heard from the West, one vendor had deducted his truck's breakdown cost from the foreign worker's salary, who was the driver of that truck. However, the Ministry of Immigration - rest in good hands, which is something that the other Coalition Ministers can learn from.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, speaking of local government elections, we are waiting for local government elections, or is it another empty promise? Just like the empty Lautoka Swimming Pool, we do not see any event hosted there and the same goes for the stadium in Ba Town.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, coming to the Ministry of Sugar, the honourable Minister is known for the way he speaks - bulldoze threat to the farmers, low yielding, farmers must vacate, but where is your promise on the Rakiraki Mill? Empty promises, Mr. Speaker, Sir!

(Hon. C.J. Singh interjects)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Do not shout at me, I am not your Permanent Secretary.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on a matter of accountability, I turn my attention to the honourable Minister for Finance because in 2015 and 2016 when he was the Shadow Minister for Finance, he he said this in 2015, "This is a deceptive budget of a confused Government". In 2016, he said, and I quote:

"Madam Speaker, this is to me a small minded budget. It is big on vote catching and spending promises, but it offers no vision on how to prepare the country for many economic challenges before us".

It feels that the current Minister for Finance is still living in the shadows.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you have produced a Budget, truly a masterpiece of modern political art. I mean, who needs reality when you have a fairy tale written in numbers? Your expenditure is \$4.8 billion, your revenue is \$3.9 billion, you have a net deficit of \$886 million, which is 6 percent of the GDP, and I would like to ask this Government, when your promises are empty, does that mean your deficits get higher?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, speaking of VAT, the honourable Minister for Finance has been a huge and strong advocate on VAT reduction while being in the Opposition. He spoke about the rich getting richer and the poor remaining poor under certain tax reforms.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2023, the honourable Minister for Finance increased VAT to 15 percent, a 6 percent increase. Here is all what he said in Opposition does not make sense because what the Minister for Finance did was those earning above 270,000 get a 5 percent tax reduction under the Social Responsibility Tax. That means, Mr. Speaker, the rich pay less tax while all of us ordinary Fijians

pay more.

On top of that, the Customs Concession Code 236 where manufacturers were allowed to access duty-free raw materials went to 3 percent, Mr. Speaker, Sir. After increasing tax, you come and produce a third budget and say that it is the relief. I ask the honourable Minister for Finance, is it a relief from your own tax hikes?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, because this is a matter of accountability of finances, back then in 2025 when the honourable Minister for Finance was the then Shadow Minister said, "Private sector investment will not follow unless our politics is stable, our economic fundamentals are right, and our economic policies are consistent". The question we are asking him is, why are your economic policies not consistent? The honourable Minister for Finance thinks it is an easy task for businesses to change prices overnight on a yearly basis, just because this Government seems to be very consistent with their inconsistencies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, speaking of debt, again, I would like to quote the current Minister for Finance's speech back in 2015. He said, "The Government cannot keep borrowing and spending its way to economic growth, like every household. How can you have a party and everyone feels good for a while, but pretty soon the party ends and it is time to pay the bills?"

Then after 10 years, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister for Finance says, "Our Government did not create the unsustainable public debt that we inherited, but with the \$4.8 billion high expenditure, you have an operating expense of 80.8 percent and only capital investment is 19.2 percent. They have borrowed a few billions in these three years and forecasted national debt is \$11.7 billion, without a cyclone, without a pandemic, without a war in the Pacific region, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

In a business term, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is like a business will borrow \$50,000, putting their assets as security. They will borrow \$50,000, have \$40,000 in wages, utilities, expenses and they have \$10,000 for investment. Now, if that \$10,000 does not generate enough money to cater for the \$40,000, they will go to the bank and say, 'Can we borrow more? Can we borrow more?' That is simply happening to this Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and that has basically become their track record.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, speaking of projects announced, I want to commend the honourable Minister's unwavering commitment to growth, and this goes to the three honourable Deputy Prime Ministers. Growth, I hear, is the new currency. I do not know if the new currency is growth, pipeline, or master plan. Never mind the actual numbers, they just keep telling us it is growing like a balloon slowly inflating until it pops. Meanwhile, the real growth in our economy seems to be in the number of projects announced rather than the number of projects completed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the capital investment in this budget is around 19.2 percent. One thing I would like to hear from the honourable Minister in his right of reply is, has there been any assessment done on the return of investments for the past three years, five years, when the Government takes out money for capital investments?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge Government, before selling us Fijians the million-billion-dollar dream, I think you should go and check if proper procedures were followed to appoint the right people in our key institutions. Just look at what is written about FICAC in the media. It is almost every week we read something.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, speaking of economic growth, the honourable Minister for Finance brags about the last two years has been strong, the economy grew by 7.5 percent in 2023 and by 4 percent in 2024, debt-to-GDP ratio - 79.8 percent, but I would like to tell this entire bloated Government, I do not care about your debt-to-GDP ratio. What matters is what every Fijian household is able to afford, invest

and save. If you really want to move away from the handout culture which they criticised for years, your policy should have focused more on empowering Fijian households, because they themselves have not been consistent with their economic policies.

This Government has an ideology, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that if Government does well and the economy does well, that goodness or wellness or prosperity of growth will trickle down to the grassroots. But, Sir, what a leader would do is to invest in people, create a thriving and safe economy, turn Fiji towards a producer industry, follow the rule of law, follow the procedures in place, and the economy will do well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, moving towards the conclusion of my speech, I will quote from yesterday's Daily Hansard on Page 1051 where honourable Bulitavu stated the Opposition is divided and confused, and they cannot be trusted. Mr. Speaker, Sir, he himself has a history of moving from SODELPA to FijiFirst, and now a Government Minister.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- He should be the last person talking about unity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition is ever united under the leadership of the honourable Leader of Opposition, and we are on the virtue of morals and principles of democracy, rule of law, human rights, equality and an equitable society, and a Fiji for all. We stand by principles, not what is at offer.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, finally, I want to emphasise that the true strength of our nation lies not just in the numbers of our promising budget and policies we enact, but it lies in the principles that underpin our democracy. Leadership is about being tested every single day. When we take an oath to serve, we do not continuously complain of what we inherited, neither politics is about front page news, interviews, international trips, slogans and stardom.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this leadership requires the ability to deal with uncertainty in global trade policies, geopolitical tensions, related risks to Fiji's tourism and export sectors, volatile global food and fuel prices and challenges in retaining skilled labour, cyclones and pandemics, and the national debt.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while I commend the team at the Ministry for Finance, the Permanent Secretary, for their hard work, this Budget is a reflection on how this Government operates. This Budget is a short-term gain for a long-term pain for the people of Fiji when you look at the rising debt levels. I expected better from this Coalition Government. *Vinaka*.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, at this point, we will suspend proceedings for lunch. Parliament will resume in one and a half hours' time.

The Parliament adjourned at 1.05 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.37 p.m.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and our fellow Fijians; I rise today with humble determination, but firm purpose. Before I go any further, I strongly condemn the sacrilege of Samabula Shiv Temple, and my thoughts and prayers are with the management and devotees as we grapple with this barbaric act, nothing new, but quite common these days, with the motives unknown by the perpetrators.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I strongly urge the honourable Minister of Multi Ethnic Affairs to immediately deploy additional funding to the managements of all places of worship, whether it be temples, churches, gurudwara or mosques, to ensure it can be secured properly, preventing any future sacrilege and damage to its properties. Now turning towards today's purpose. On paper, this Budget looks sweet, glossy headlines, catchy slogans, but it is a cruel joke. It is designed to dazzle us into forgetting the last two years of 15 percent VAT hike, runaway prices and family stress to breaking point. This sugar-coated spin asks us to applaud while the cost of living climbs even higher.

I speak for the workers in our towns, farmers in our villages, students in our classrooms, and every Fijian whose daily life is shaped by the decisions we make in this House. Promises fade without actions; budgets mean little unless they deliver real jobs; secure incomes and a future for our children that we can trust. Today, I offer a clear-cut and a clear-eyed view of this Budget's strength, its gaps and hard fixes we must insist upon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when FijiFirst embraced the Australia Labour Mobility Scheme, we acted with purpose. We helped unemployed Fijians into structural jobs in Australia, jobs that paid more, taught new skills and sent remittances home to support our families. It was smart, bold and it worked.

At the very moment, business groups and Government advisers pushed to import 16,000 workers from the Pacific region to fill the gaps in tourism, agriculture, health services, and construction. Meanwhile, nearly 17,000 of our own citizens registered with the National Employment Centre unable to take local jobs without forfeiting their PALM or RSE placements.

That is a policy paradox born of poor planning. Exporting our workforce under PALM or ADF arrangements, importing labour to plug our own gaps, and benching our own people in the process. We cannot accept it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I strongly suggest that we must fix this now by:

- (1) Amending the National Employment Centre rules so registrants may accept qualified local work without losing overseas eligibility;
- (2) Coordinating defense recruitment, foreign worker intake, and domestic hiring into one national labour strategy.

Prioritising Fijian citizens in training, housing support, wage incentives, and social protections before expanding external labour sources. Above all, we must make Fiji a place where good jobs exist and people do not feel forced to leave. Training a new worker costs thousands of dollars and months of time. Each departure strips us of experience and knows-how and each replacement doubles our expense. Fiji cannot become a permanent labour pool for Australia and New Zealand.

Our greatest asset is our people. We owe them clarity, opportunity, and respect. They can serve abroad if they choose, but never at the expense of rebuilding our economy here at home.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have heard the Government talk about “rebuilding public service delivery.” We have seen them allocate \$25 million to the Ministry of Employment. But as always, it is not what is said, it is what is missing. It is high time we focus on what has been deliberately shadowed from us by presenting sugar coated statements.

This Ministry is no longer just managing job placements and mediation hearings. It is now legally bound to administer two major compensation laws the;

- (1) Work Care Act 2025, which covers all workplace and school-related accident claims; and
- (2) Accident Compensation (Amendment) Act 2025, which restricts ACCF’s role to monitor vehicle cases and passes the rest onto the Ministry.

Yet, within that \$25 million, \$7 million is already locked for compensation payouts, and \$5.7 million is allocated for the long-overdue Vatuoula Strike settlement. Another \$100,000 goes to FTUC for worker education. So, let us be clear that leaves barely \$12 million to run everything else, including labour inspections, dispute mediation, youth employment schemes, and the National Employment Centre. With no capital injection for infrastructure, systems, or expansion. It is simple mathematics and the result is alarming.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry also inherited 14,000 unresolved accident claims — cases sitting idle under Veritas Pte Ltd, a firm handpicked by the previous government and paid \$900,000 annually. That contract is gone. Veritas is gone but the backlog remains. We are told progress is happening. Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations for responding to our request and processing numerous claims that the people brought to us.

There have been reports for 14,000 cases, so I asked the honourable Minister, how many have been resolved? How many new claims have come in under the Work Care Act since June last year? What is the average claim turnaround time today — from injury to payout? The digital claims portal was promised, when will it go live and where is the funding? How many new staff have been hired to handle this caseload? What enforcement powers have been activated?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are not rhetorical questions. They are the questions of workers injured on the job. Students hurt at school. Families waiting, medical bills mounting, while promises pile higher than results. This Government says it is laying strong foundations but this just seems to be a dream without realisation. But we cannot build foundations out of missing data, silent systems, and underfunded mandates. If you give the Ministry legal responsibility without giving it logistical power, you do not have a strategy, you have a scapegoat.

Let me say this for those who cannot work, for those whose injuries are invisible in this Chamber: If claims are still sitting in boxes, this scheme is broken. If payouts are slow or inconsistent, then justice is being rationed. If inspectors lack the authority to shut down unsafe workplaces, then the law is just paperwork. We demand transparent reporting, monthly claim statistics, published targets, digital access, regional reach not slogans, but proof, because the Ministry responsible for justice must show results, otherwise, it is just managing delay. Mr. Speaker, Sir, delay is its own kind of denial. Agriculture is not just tradition, it is survival.

In this Budget, the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways receives \$115.3 million, an 18 percent increase. On paper, that looks bold, but look closer operating funds rise nearly 60 percent while capital investment drops 7 percent. This means less for the infrastructure our farmers rely such on irrigation, farm roads, storage, and processing hubs. Without those, this sector cannot move forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, key allocations include:

- (1) \$39 million for crop research and extension - good for innovation but useless without access to water and roads,
- (2) \$3 million for mechanization grants - just 2.5 percent of the budget and yet this is what brings tractors to the fields,
- (3) \$25.6 million for Waterways - critical, but spread thin across flood zones and irrigation needs,
- (4) Support for Navuso and Tutu Institutes - needed to sustain training pipelines, and
- (5) \$1 million in input subsidies - barely enough to blunt the rising cost of fertilizer and weedicides.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these programmes may look good in press releases, but our farmers has a different story. Research helps but we need water, roads and markets. They are right without proper irrigation fields turn to dust. Without sealed roads produce rots before it reaches the mill. Without cold storage, margins vanish, and families suffer. We must invest seriously in four priorities:

- (1) National Irrigation Master Plan, with mapped canals, pumps, and reservoirs in every key farming zone;
- (2) Farm-to-Market Road Program, focused on the sugar-belt, root crop corridors, and vegetable hubs;
- (3) Agro-Processing Parks in Vanua Levu and Viti Levu, to create rural jobs in drying, milling, packaging, and cold-chain logistic; and
- (4) Digital Agri-Platform delivering real-time forecasts, price data, and buyer networks straight to farmers' mobile phones.

We also need a Crop Insurance Scheme because one storm should not bankrupt a farmer and that safety net will unlock confidence and investment. Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Waterways Division is putting in work, dredging, drainage, and river management. I hope some consideration will be given to carry out the dredging of Sigatoka River that is becoming shallower in each coming year. This adds to the flash flooding around upper the East Bank of Valley Road, but climate change will not wait.

Sea level rise is accelerating. Rainfall is intensifying. Flash floods are threatening homes and harvests. We must:

- map high-risk catchments;
- build natural retention basins; and
- train communities in early warning protocols because climate resilience is not optional, it is a survival imperative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now allow me to say this, with the respect it deserves. Before his passing, the late honourable Vatimi Rayalu led this Ministry with rare clarity and commitment. He did not just talk agriculture, he lived it. He met farmers face to face. He pressed for reforms. He pushed for dredging and he worked not for headlines but for results. He was, in my view one of the most effective and hardworking Ministers in this Coalition Government. His legacy endures in every field he touched and every policy he moved forward.

Mr. Speaker Sir, to whoever steps into his role these are very big shoes to fill. Not big because of titles but because of impact. We on this side will honour that legacy not just with kind words, but with relentless pressure, oversight, and action. The farmers deserve nothing less. *Vinaka vakalevu*, late honourable Rayalu. Your work still speaks and this Parliament must continue the conversation.

I hope the incoming Minister for Agriculture will expediate more funding into the control of stray animals that has rampaged farms and as a result many farmers in Valley Road and Natadola are giving up on planting vegetables. The same goes for sugarcane farmers of Tagitagi, Maro, Waqali, Ciri and other areas of Sigatoka.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I would like to thank the Minister for Infrastructure for his efforts in supplying water to the outskirts of Natadola in the village of Navisabasaba and metered water to Waibogi upon many request from the people around the area. However, I humbly request the honourable Minister that just 25 meters from Navisabasaba Village is the Ahmadiyya Muslim Mosque. The main pipeline is last stationed at Navisabasaba Village. The management of Ahmadiyya Muslim Mosque has met all the requirements and paid the necessary required fees as far as application for new meter is concerned. The last communication from Water Authority, Lautoka was that the proposed connection of metered water to Ahmadiyya Muslim Mosque is on hold.

I sincerely request the honourable Minister to immediately attend to this as worshippers are finding it difficult to access safe drinking water as current borehole has salty water and runs low during dry season. The Muslim Community of Navisabasaba Ahmadiyya Muslim Mosque is pinning its hope high on the Coalition Government for this assistance since metered water is just 25 meters away from this mosque. Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, numerous requests have come from the residents of Dreketi to upgrade the road near Fiji Rice that serves the main route to the nearby school.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst we welcome the allowance given to Justice of Peace - \$200 per month but question many people are asking as to why Commissioner of Oaths have not been considered. Why so much indifference? I urge the Government to make an allocation in this regard.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is a step in the wrong direction. To many, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget misses the mark on numerous fronts. When authorities are misguided, any Government cannot create a long-term vision for its country's future. A layman cannot work out that the Coalition Government's approach is seriously flawed and it will have a drastic implication on the livelihood of all citizens. It will not improve our economy either.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget is gradually but building a path to debt crisis. There are already signs of heavy reliance on borrowing to fund necessary expenditures articulated in the Budget. While borrowing might drive growth in key areas, it will slowly put fiscal pressure on the country. It is apparently clear that there is no clear plan for sustainable debt management and this may propel the worst debt crisis in our history. The Government could have embarked on an innovative tax-exempt system and improved efficiency and productivity in all key sectors of economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget does not empower sufficient private sector investment and low wages. We can hardly see any form of programme that plans to diversify the economy and create inclusive growth that would benefit all Fijians. With the rising cost of living, Fijians in rural areas are feeling the strain and apart from only a modest increase in social assistance, not much has been announced to provide immediate relief to the low-income households.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a small allocation for climate adaptation compared previously is not appropriate to mitigate the devastating effects of rising sea levels, extreme weather patterns and degradation of the environment. Despite Fiji being a leader in climate resilience in the Pacific region, the Government's approach to climate change is not very encouraging. The Budget fails to rise to the equation. It totally lacks a clear-cut vision on how to address the critical sectors which will benefit all Fijians. It boggles my mind to comprehend how the country will strive to make meaningful progress in the next couple of years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government must seriously re-evaluate this Budget and move forward. A more forward-thinking approach aimed at reducing debt, inequality and stagnation of this economy. The Budget seems to be more about political interests and less about the people in the country. If this is not the case, then why is the life of the people continuously troubled, miserable and unhappy under this Government? As a result, people leave for greener pastures far, far away from the country of birth, a country they once loved and cherished, a country they thought never to leave.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, people do not leave the country, they leave bad governments, bad law who do not appreciate their value and talent. The Budget fails to address the urgent needs of most of our citizens and does little to improve their material conditions.

This Budget is an exercise in political theatre, a desperate attempt to refocus failures. As each day passes, this Government increasingly shows how disconnected it is from the views, values and visions of everyday Fijians. I say to every Fijian that the Opposition's vision is to get our country back on track, to make our life easier, to make us safe and secure again, to be fair and firm, to be compassionate and definite, to unite and not to divide.

MR. SPEAKER.- The next speaker on the list, the honourable Minister for Immigration is away, ill and is unable to attend today's sitting. He may be able to attend tomorrow's sitting and I have agreed that his name be moved forward to tomorrow's line-up.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Speaker, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, Assistant Ministers and Members of Parliaments - *ni sa yadra vinaka*. Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset please allow me to extend my heartfelt congratulations to the *Gone Turaga na Tui Nayau, Tui Lau, Sau ni Vanua o Lau*. The installation ceremony showcased a grand event that celebrates Fijian culture and tradition and truly embodied our *vuvale* spirit and hospitality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, having witnessed this magnificent installation ceremony, the orchestration of culture and tradition, the smiles and the joyful atmosphere, rooted in deep spirituality and unity. I am humbled and reminded of who we are as a people. We are many yet we are one. It was an occasion that has not been witnessed in the Yasana Vaka-Turaga o Lau for the last four decades and indeed for most parts of Fiji for the last 16 years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is only through the leadership of the honourable Prime Minister and this Coalition Government that we now witness the restoration of self-determination for the *iTaukei* people, granting them the right to shape their economic, social, cultural and political future. For far too long, a narrative has been allowed to take hold that to speak of empowering the indigenous people of this country is to be labelled as racist. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the narrative must end and must not be repeated in this country. It is time to support the growth and empowerment of the *iTaukei* people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must condemn racist remarks made by the likes of honourable Ketan Lal. I make particular reference to his 21st May social media comments and I quote:

“Let me say this clearly. (Where is he?) I did not support the re-establishment of the GCC, but the GCC is now here and I must live with it.”

I would like to remind honourable Ketan Lal, unfortunately he is not here, that you are very young and do not understand nor appreciate the role of tradition, culture and the *vanua*, and indeed, the GCC in the life of this nation. Hear me and hear me well, honourable Ketan Lal. The *vanua* and our Chiefs will always be in this land we call our Fiji. Stop with the racist remarks and work collaboratively with us. This is our home. We welcome you and we will also correct you when you need to be corrected. Be respectful and then the *vanua* will hear you. Listen, honourable Bala.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please allow me to pay tribute to the former Minister for Agriculture and Waterways, honourable Vatimi Rayalu. He will be remembered as the father of modern agriculture in Fiji. I would also like to offer my best wishes to a true son of Vusu, my honourable *a'vu, lavo*, honourable Inosi Kuridrani, for our remaining term of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today in full support of the Coalition Government's National Budget, the 2025-2026 Appropriations Bill 2025. I take this opportunity to thank the leadership of the Coalition Government, under the Prime Minister, honourable Sitiveni Rabuka and the Minister for Finance, honourable Biman Prasad. The country definitely needs strong, decisive leadership with vision and purpose. The 2025-2026 Budget, as announced by the honourable Minister for Finance, is backed on empowering Fijians to unlock their potential in terms of economic empowerment. It takes advantage of sustained GDP growth, low inflation, high foreign reserve, and economic stability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after the Budget announcement on 27th June, 2025, I personally visited our people in Ra, and our town in Rakiraki, including market vendors, villagers, business owners, and they have all labelled this Budget as a “good and smart Budget”. It is strategic and targeted, and will benefit the ordinary person. The people of Ra that I have met during my recent visit to my province have all informed me that for sustainability sake, this country cannot afford a change in Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is responsible, inclusive, and forward-looking. Most importantly, it is a testament to the effective governance and disciplined economic management undertaken by this Government in the past two years. Mr. Speaker, Sir, through prudent fiscal management, we have stabilised public finances, and noted improvement in debt sustainability indicators and Government revenue performance. We have made strategic investments in critical infrastructure, including transportation, education, and the digital economy, reflected in capital allocations under the Ministry of Finance 2025-2026 Budget estimates.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have maintained essential services, including health, education, and justice, without sacrificing physical responsibility. Additionally, key social sectors continue to receive targeted allocations to protect vulnerable populations and promote inclusive growth. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the allocation before us does more than fund programmes. It actually empowers our Fijian people. It reflects our national priorities, access to justice, social protection, digital transformation, and economic resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it strengthens our institutions, ensuring they are equipped not only to serve the present, but to shape a more just, equitable, and sustainable future. This is a Budget that puts people first, honours our international obligations, and builds confidence in our democratic systems.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our work in the Ministry of Justice is guided by our Strategic Development Plan 2025 to 2029 which aligns fully with the overarching goals of the Fiji National Development Plan and Vision 2050. A Strategic Plan is firmly anchored in the Government's commitment to human rights, the rule of law and inclusive service delivery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this budget gives the Ministry of Justice, the capacity and confidence to continue delivering on our core mission to:

- uphold the rule of law as enshrined in the Fiji Constitution 2013 which guarantees equal protection before the law and affirms an independent judiciary;
- protect the rights of every citizen, especially through access to legal identity registration system and legal aid in accordance with Chapter 2 of the Constitution, which talks about the Bill of Rights;
- Serves our communities with dignity and efficiency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the allocation to the Ministry of Justice will directly support the ministry's statutory responsibilities, which includes the:

- (1) Registrar of titles responsible for land registration under the Land Transfer Act, vital for property security and economic development;
- (2) Registrar of Companies, administering business registration and compliance under the Companies Act 2015 plus promoting business transparency and investor confidence;
- (3) Official Receivers office as well, which facilitates equitable insolvency and bankruptcy process in accordance with the Bankruptcy Act; and
- (4) Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages Act which safeguards the legal identity and civil rights of every Fijian under birth, deaths and marriage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this budget is transformative. There is a commitment to continue investment in the digitisation of justice services. This year, a significant portion of the capital allocation will go towards e-Filing and digitisation, mobile civil registration units and integrated case management and business process automation platform for timely, transparent service delivery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this budget is also a powerful statement of fiscal responsibility.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. RATU. J.B. NIUDAMU.- Despite persistent global headwinds, including inflationary pressures, supply chain disruptions and climate related vulnerabilities, our Government has reduced the net deficit to 6 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). We have also made significant progress in managing public debt repayments...

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Compared to your past 16 odd 20 years! Debt repayments have been reduced, please can you listen! Debt repayments have been reduced to \$601.9 million...

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- ...as detailed in the 2025-2026 Budget estimates reflecting a better debt profile and improved cash flow management. This reduction has allowed for the for the reallocation of fund towards essential services such as health, education, justice, social welfare and to key development priorities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this achievements are not coincidental. They are the result of strategic physical planning, strong economic stewardship and bold but necessary decisions made by this Government in the national interest.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will now reflect on the positive impact of this budget to our rural communities and to my people in the province of Ra. I welcome the \$284 million allocation to the WAF in the 2025-2026 budget. This includes planned upgrades to water supply system in rural and pre-urban areas of Ra, as outlined in the WAF 2025-2026 Capital Projects pipeline.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, clean water and sanitation are not just development targets, they are human rights. They are essential to public health, dignity and productivity. They underpin the functioning of school, health facilities, agricultural processing and local businesses. The Ra Provincial Council

Development Plan 2024-2028 identifies water, roads and energy access as top priorities to unlock local economic opportunities. This budget takes a meaningful step towards these goals by resourcing these critical enablers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also note the complementary allocation made to the Ministry of Public Works and Meteorological Services for rural roads upgrades, which includes feeder roads in Northern Viti Levu, connecting isolated communities in Ra to markets, clinics and schools. As a *kai* Ra, I rise not only as a Member of this Parliament, but as a voice for the people of Ra. I appreciate and acknowledge the work that had continued, and I stand with the Coalition Government in its continued prioritising of policies that stimulate investment in our 14 provinces, particularly the Province of Ra.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ra Province has the land, the labour and the local ownership to become a thriving economic zone. However, as highlighted in the Ra Provincial Council Development Strategy 2024-2028 and supported by the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development baseline reports, the region remains underserved in key infrastructure areas, but the budgetary allocation for 2025-2026, will include upgrade roads, especially in the interior from Nakorotubu, Tokaimalo and Nasau corridors, to allow people to:

- (1) Travel safely;
- (2) Bring produce to markets;
- (3) Access health, education, Government services, reliable electricity and water – as outlined in the Fiji Rural Electrification Policy and the Water Authority of Fiji's Capital Works Plan 2025-2026 – and state-of-the-art Hospital in Ra to reduce pressure on Lautoka Hospital and meet the health needs of a growing population – as outlined in the Ministry of Health Strategic Development Plan 2024-2028.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the investment is a response to the call for strategic national investment in a province that has long contributed to Fiji's development through agriculture, forestry and labour. I welcome the Government's commitment to rural and regional development through the \$52.6 million allocation to the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and the \$32 million for rural roads and feeder upgrades under the Fiji Roads Authority. These investments are critical to connecting Ra to the national economy and ensuring no Fijian is left behind.

I support the Budget and the allocations to the various Ministries, particularly, the call for continued advocacy for the establishment of a business incubator in Ra – a dedicated facility to provide:

- (1) entrepreneur training and mentorship to youth and women;
- (2) facilitate access to finance, markets and technology through partnerships with the Ministry of Trade, Cooperatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and financial institutions; and
- (3) help establish value-added industries in agriculture and handicrafts in line with the MSMEs Development Framework 2024-2028.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we invest in rural Fiji, we invest in national resilience and prosperity. We are usually fond of the term which goes like this, when Ra *Uluda* thrives, Fiji thrives. This Budget is not only just a budget, it is a modern Budget. It invests in the fundamental shift to making justice accessible, relevant and responsive to the realities of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to take a moment to acknowledge the vision, leadership and compassion of the Coalition Government. The reduction in VAT went from 15 percent to 12.5 percent and the continuation of zero-rated VAT on 22 essential items are bold and people-centred policy decisions. Christmas has indeed come earlier for the people of Fiji and we have to thank the Coalition Government for that.

This decision is made in direct response to the cost of living pressures faced by the ordinary Fijian households. According to the Fiji Bureau of Statistics, Household Income Expenditure Survey and the Consumer Price Index (CPI) report, food and fuel remain the most significant contributors to household expenses. By reducing VAT across the board while maintaining zero-rated VAT on essential items including rice, flour, edible oils, infant formula, electricity under 100 kilowatts and medicines, the Government has delivered tangible economic relief to low-and middle-income families.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, such policies strengthen public trust in Government. They reaffirm that this administration is not only committed to sound economic managements, but also to protect the welfare of every Fijian family, especially during times of global economic uncertainty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in closing, I sincerely commend the Coalition Government for delivering a Budget that is bold, responsible and people-focused. This is a Budget that speaks to the heart of every Fijian. I hope the Opposition are listening to my speech this afternoon.

I have heard honourable Rinesh Sharma criticising honourable Bulitavu. Please, listen! What I have heard throughout the week is a confused Opposition. You are relying on a legacy that belongs to FijiFirst.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- You were part of it.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Of course. But please, I want to clarify this. You are trying to take credit of a legacy which FijiFirst are supposed to take credit for. A party that is outside of this Parliament. And now, there is one group here, G1 is missing and you are trying to claim the legacy of the FijiFirst party. And the FijiFirst party who are now forming the FijiansFirst party, they have disassociated themselves from the Opposition so we are just left with a confused Opposition.

With those few Sir, and as representative of the people of Ra and as a Member of Parliament, I stand in full support for the 2025-2026 National Budget.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition and fellow Members of Parliament, members of the public, a very good afternoon.

I rise to deliver my response in support of the 2025-2026 National Budget. Mr. Speaker Sir, I begin by thanking God Almighty, from whom all blessings flow. I thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, Professor Biman Prasad, his PS Shiri Gounder and their team for their leadership in articulating a budget that reflects the aspirations of our people.

I also express my appreciation to the Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Dr. Rajjeli Taga and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs team for their continued commitment and guidance in our diplomatic missions.

To the National Budget, the work of the Fiscal Review Committee and the Ministry of Finance must be commended. This budget is both smart and restorative. It is a testament to the value of unity and intellectual dialogue, laying the foundation for responsible economic governance.

Mr. Speaker, this Budget contains targeted and high-impact measures to support our people and we have heard that over the last couple of days.

- 10 percent Bus Fare Reduction: Government has introduced a 10 percent bus fare subsidy for a 12-month period effective from 1st August with an estimated cost of around \$10

million.

- Student Transport Assistance: The budget for which has been increased to \$50 million.
- Back-to-School Assistance will continue and is scheduled to be paid in January 2026, with a total allocation of \$40 million.
- Police Force Expansion will receive a budgetary allocation of \$240.3 million, an increase of \$13.5 million from the previous year. This is aimed at enhancing law enforcement visibility and operational presence across the country.
- HIV Awareness and Prevention: The Government has allocated \$10 million for a comprehensive approach to testing, prevention efforts, and public awareness to address the growing HIV crisis.
- Duty Reductions: The budget includes the elimination of the 15 percent duty on no-sugar-added juices, making nutritious beverages more affordable and encouraging healthier consumption habits.

These allocations and measures reflect Government's commitment to addressing key areas such as transportation, education, law enforcement, public health, and promoting healthier lifestyles.

On to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, overall, the Ministry's total allocation of \$51.1 million for the next fiscal year, an increase of \$7.4 million from \$43.8 million demonstrates our Government's unwavering commitment to strategic investments that strengthen Fiji's voice, that broaden our global reach, that deepen our partnerships across bilateral and multilateral forums. This increase is not just financial, it is foundational to our global re-engagement.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I fully concur with the honourable Prime Minister's address yesterday. His announcement of a \$51 million allocation to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs clearly signals that our foreign service is not merely symbolic, it is now a proactive driver of opportunities and our diplomats return with tangible investments and benefits that directly improve the lives of our people. This is diplomacy for the people, not for show. Our envoys have been urged to step boldly beyond conventional boundaries, to open doors, to vigorously promote Fiji's interests, and to ensure that whatever regional or global decisions are made, Fiji's seat at the table is secure, and our voice remains powerful and cannot be ignored.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs continues to execute smart processes and systems to strengthen bilateral, regional, and multilateral engagements. As the principal government agency responsible for advancing Fiji's international interests, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is a steward of Fiji's international partnerships, an advocate for regional voice, and a custodian of diplomacy that reflects Fiji's culture, values and vision for the future. This is guided by the three pillars of sovereignty, security and prosperity in the Ministry's Strategic Plan, and we work to advance Fiji's position in the world while serving the people with integrity, professionalism and purpose.

Fiji's global footprint continues through our formal diplomatic relations with 182 countries, 13 overseas missions and one Suva-based regional mission. The Fiji missions comprise embassies in Beijing, Jakarta, Tokyo, Abu Dhabi and Washington DC while the High Commission offices are in Canberra, London, New Delhi, Wellington, Port Moresby and Kuala Lumpur. These missions offer support to the growing Fijian diaspora, mainly through consular services. The two permanent representatives to the United Nations oversee our missions in New York and Geneva.

The reopening of our missions in Port Moresby, Washington and Kuala Lumpur has been tangible proof of the Government's commitment to broadening Fiji's global footprint. In the new financial year, a new embassy planned for Israel will further demonstrate our intent to engage in meaningful partnerships in innovation and security, in agriculture, climate change, water management and renewable energy.

Our budget, Sir, also includes \$2.57 million for the review and adjustment of post allowances for all 42 diplomats serving across our 13 overseas missions. This review is the first since 2005 and is aligned with United Nations cost-of-living standards, ensuring our envoys are supported fairly and sustainably. Fiji's Diplomatic Missions are fundamental to the delivery of consular services to Fijians abroad, as may be delegated to the ministry by line agencies.

The Ministry's activities overseas work in tandem with the domestic capabilities in foreign affairs, trade, development policy, consular services and critical infrastructure. Sir, the Pacific Islands Development Forum now falls under the Ministry's banner as the project delivery arm of the Government and provides a platform to leaning global and acting local in ways that touch the lives of our people in a very real and meaningful sense. Furthermore, a sum of \$2.69 million is allocated for the purchase of a new property in Wellington. This follows the planned sale of the current Fiji House, which is expected to fetch NZ\$1.675 million. This strategic relocation aligns with our infrastructure modernization priorities.

The Ministry has also allocated \$1.5 million for phased refurbishment of the Fiji High Commission Chancery in London. While this work is undertaken over the next two years, Sir, an additional \$469,000 is budgeted for temporary office rental in London to ensure operational continuity.

Over the past 50 years of evolution as an independent Pacific nation, State, Sir, Fiji has showcased our leadership capabilities on critical issues confronting the region and the world, like the existential threat of climate change, ocean sustainability, and the protection of human rights. The Ministry believes in the strength of Pacific solidarity, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat as the custodian and defender of the Ocean of Peace and other multilateral agencies such as the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) that promote peace and development in the region.

As a forward-looking approach, Sir, the Ministry is proactive in identifying leadership potential within Fiji to serve in regional and international agencies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji will contribute a total of \$1.85 million towards the construction of the new SPC building in Suva as part of a two-year commitment following Cabinet's endorsement of a \$3.7 million total contribution. This reflects our leadership within the Pacific Community. The balance of this project will be supported by SPC and other partners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our diplomats are the torchbearers of Fiji's identity on the world stage. So, this budget ensures that our 42 Fijian diplomats stationed abroad are well supported to effectively promote Fiji's values and protect our interests. The global economy remains overshadowed by increasing uncertainty, especially in relation to international affairs.

The implementation of Fiji's Foreign Policy White Paper 2024 is essential to strengthening sovereignty, security and prosperity in the delivery of foreign policy goals and enhancing bilateral and multilateral trade and investment, whilst taking advantage of its strategic position as the hub of the South Pacific.

This budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a lever for transformative diplomacy in line with Foreign Policy White Paper. The increased allocation supports:

- (1) Diplomatic Training and Capacity Building - Ensuring our envoys are trained in climate diplomacy, trade negotiation and international law.
- (2) Public diplomacy: Enhancing Fiji's visibility through digital diplomacy and cultural showcases abroad.

- (3) Regional leadership: Strengthening our voice in the Pacific Islands Forum, MSG and other regional mechanisms.
- (4) Economic diplomacy: Promoting exports, attracting investments, and negotiating favourable trade agreements.
- (5) Diaspora engagement: Improving consular services and outreach to our Fijians living abroad.
- (6) Infrastructure modernisation: Rationalising properties abroad such as the relocation of the Fiji High Commission in Wellington to a more modern and efficient facility.

The Vuvale Partnership with Australia stands as a pillar of our foreign policy, enabling multi-sectoral cooperation in health, education, defence, climate change, labour mobility and beyond. This partnership is built on trust, mutual respect and shared values, reflecting our commitment to regional stability and resilience. As the honourable Prime Minister emphasised, this relationship is not aid-based but one of co-investment and strategic cooperation.

I just want to spend a couple of minutes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Key Diplomatic Outcomes and Returns on Investment in the one year from July 2024.

Mr. Speaker, the overseas trips taken by Government representatives deliver tangible outcomes, enhancing Fiji's standing and delivering economic, environmental and social benefits well beyond their cost. New bilateral agreements and trade deals are projected to add more than Fiji's \$130 million to our economy through loans, grants and increased exports. Our strong advocacy on climate change has brought in \$150 million in adaptation funds and international cooperation. We mobilised vaccines, scholarships, technical assistance that directly improve the well-being of our people. These diplomatic engagements are not trips for trips' sakes, they are strategic investments in Fiji's security, prosperity and global influence.

Enhanced skills and capabilities of civil servants and diplomats through international exchanges and workshops are extremely vital. I will now reply to some comments from the other side here in Parliament and online about travel. I just wanted to point out that between 2014 and 2022, the FijiFirst Government spent an average of \$3 million a year in overseas travel; only overseas travel. Multiply that by eight years from 2014 to 2022, that is \$24 million on overseas travel. The annual breakdown as reported by the honourable Finance Minister and I will give you a domestic versus overseas travel split from 2014 to 2022. Overseas travel \$24 million and domestic travel \$50.4 million.

On the subject of illicit drugs, Mr. Speaker, in replying to the honourable Leader of the Opposition's comments yesterday when he said, and I quote:

“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.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it would have been different had the 27 Members of the then FijiFirst government who were sitting here on that day on 7th September, 2019 voted in favour of honourable Tikoduadua's motion for a Special Parliamentary Committee to investigate the growing hard drugs crisis in Fiji. That was back in September 2019.

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- I still have a little bit more time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, so allow me to reply to honourable Premila Kumar. I need to rebut some of her claims today on Government repackaging. In response to honourable Premila's comments regarding the current Government allegedly

repacking the work of the previous administration, I wish to clarify and correct the record. The digitisation of the First Home Ownership Initiative Grant Programme from talk to tangible action. The previous government talked about empowering first-time homeowners, but failed to deliver any concrete platform or mechanism.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Not true.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- This Government launched and operationalised the first home ownership portal, providing real tools and access for aspiring first-time homeowners. It is not repackaging, it is real delivery where there was previously only rhetoric.

Sir, PPP lots, avoiding a financial catastrophe. While the FijiFirst Government initiated PPP lot developments, they failed to ensure affordability and accessibility for ordinary Fijians. Their partnership with IFC was poorly vetted and posed serious financial risks. It was this Government, when it intervened, reassessed, restructured the approach to ensure that the people, not foreign interests, benefit from land development.

Informal settlement upgrade programme. The ISUP projects - cleaning up the mess, yes. FijiFirst initiated the informal settlement upgrading programme work in informal settlements like Cuvu in Sigatoka, Ledrusasa in Nadi and Waidamudamu in Nausori, but the execution was disorganised and misleading. Communities were given false promises, such as free lots, without proper legal or logistical backing. This Government took the time to engage directly with the affected communities, listen to their concerns, and worked with iTLTB and the Ministry of Lands to secure legitimate titles and resolve longstanding issues. It is not about claiming credit. It is about fixing what was broken and restoring trust.

The current Government is not repackaging. It is repairing, delivering, and transforming. Where the previous administration left behind half-baked plans and broken promises, this Government has stepped in with integrity, consultation and results. I still have four minutes, and I have every intention of taking it all up. I wanted to take this time, Mr. Speaker, to strongly condemn the sacrilege at the Shiv Mandir in Samabula, a place that honourable Agni Deo Singh and the honourable Minister of Policing and I visited for the *havan* and the prayers for the victims of the Air India crash not too long ago.

I also want to share my deep condolences with the family of the former Minister for Agriculture and Waterways, and also with his team, his very, very dedicated team and I thank you for that. Thank you for the services that you have given this country. Because we have won a few matches in the Pacific - basketball, rugby against Scotland, it would be remiss of me, Mr. Speaker, if I did not congratulate the 2025 Pacific Rim Deaf Rugby Sevens winners. The men crowned Pacific champions beat Samoa 36-0, Australia 12-0 and Japan 29-10, while the women's deaf rugby team rebounded to win their division, defeating Australia 26-0 in the finals.

With that, Sir, this Budget recognises that diplomacy is not an expense. It is an investment, an investment in our people, our global standing, and our vision for a peaceful and prosperous Pacific. Mr. Speaker, I fully support the 2025-2026 National Budget and I commend it to this House.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet colleagues, honourable Leader of the Opposition and members whose scrutiny strengthens democracy, honourable Members of Parliament, distinguished guests, and every Fijian joining us through live stream across the country and abroad, *ni sa bula vinaka* and a very good afternoon to you all.

Firstly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to join my colleagues to honour and congratulate the newly installed *Turaga Bale na Tui Nayau, Tui Lau Sau ni Vanua o Lau* for his successful ascension last week

to the honoured chiefly title, that had been vacant for 21 years. I wish him Ratu Tevita Uluilakeba Mara well, good health and blessed years of leadership ahead of him and to the *vanua vakaturaga* o Lau unity and grace during his tenure of leadership.

I would also like to extend my warmest congratulations to Captain Tevita Ikanivere and our gallant Flying Fijians team for their brave and well-executed game against the mighty Scotland last Saturday, and also against the Wallabies the previous week.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is with deep sadness, as well, that I stand here today to join my colleagues in paying tribute to the memory of the late Minister for Agriculture and Waterways, honourable Vatimi Rayalu, who is no longer with us. For a person that was larger than life and whose embodiment was of strong and fearless, dedicated servant of the people, he will be sadly and sorely missed, and his work achieved to date will be appreciated and continued, hopefully, with the same vigour and honour by those who will fill his shoes. I thank his family, his beloved wife, Mrs. Vasiti Rayalu, the children and family members for sharing - the husband, dad and loved one with Fiji. I also take this time to congratulate honourable Inosi Kuridrani for rejoining Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am in full support of this Budget. This response takes place in an unique circumstances, unique that we are operating with a Coalition Government, which is important and historically significant, because it reflects the will of the people. The Budget not only represents the will of the people, it is futuristic as well, preparing our education, our stakeholders and students into the future. It continues to demonstrate a strong united commitment to education with a record budgetary allocation of \$847.4 million, a substantial increase from last year's \$784.1 million. For this allocation, the Ministry of Education receives \$675.4 million, which includes higher education institutions of \$86.5 million. In addition of \$153 million is provided for TSLS scholarship.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our education system, while resilient, confronts significant pressures impacting national development and every Fijian well-being. This budget tackles these issues head-on, delivering targeted strategic investments for maximum impact, and crucially, to address poverty, hunger, good health and well-being, address gender equality, clean water and sanitation, decent work and economic growth, to name a few, through quality education and lifelong learning skills.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget listens and responds by accommodating what it can on the needs of all school stakeholders, including teachers, students, heads of school and school management committees. In recognition of this, we thank the budgetary allocation given to the School Management Association of \$500,000, the Principal and Heads of Teachers Association \$300,000 each for the first time. The Ministry of Education will ensure that proper checks and balances are in place to address accountability and transparency in the way the funds are going to be used.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the power of education to change a life cannot be understated, and we need to ensure that access to quality and basic education should not be a privilege afforded only to some. Many children still find quality education out of reach, diminishing their life chances to opportunities. We, as a government, simply cannot shrink from our responsibilities to them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget underscores the Coalition Government's unwavering commitment to quality and inclusive education. We must be bolder, more ambitious, and continue to set high evidence-based targets. To that end, I have begun critically assessing our Ministry's targets and milestones. In a significant step forward, yesterday marked a significant historic milestone for Fiji's education system, when the Fiji Education Review Team and the Fiji Law Reform Commission officially handed over their reports on the review of the Education Act to the honourable Acting Attorney-General and myself. This revised Act incorporates modernised forms of learning and introduces new ways to support students, teachers, and other education stakeholders in this modern era.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have reviewed the examination results over the past years and we see the necessity to review the current practise of automatic progression for students. We are looking to submit a paper to the Cabinet for the decision on the No Repeat Policy for automatic progression. At the same time, we are finalising the groundwork and consultation on the reintroduction of scaling into our national examination. This will ensure that our education system is responsive to the diverse challenges of our schools and students around Fiji.

Additionally, we are looking at options of centralised marking for all examination papers, with markers gathering at a central venue in Suva. This is done with the intention to produce timely national examination results as compared to the current practise, in addition to security of papers, consistency of marking, and maintain the independence of the markers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the heartbeat of the education system is the curriculum. The Ministry of Education, with a team of experts, will initiate a review of the National Curriculum Framework with a budget of \$33,000. This will be done in consultation with the education commissioners and stakeholders to address the raised concerns on the relevance of the current curriculum. The current Framework was last reviewed in 2013 and it is now proper that it undertakes another review after a lapse of more than a decade.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to the above, I will now focus on the crucial strategic areas of the Ministry of Education in this response. In the Early Childhood Education (ECE), the Ministry of Education appreciates the allocation of \$32 million, an increase of \$10 million from 2024-2025 Budget. This increase will allow the payment of eight hours to all 1,423 ECE teachers, across all 873 pre-primary centres in our nine education districts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government sees the importance of accessing education at the early childhood level. I would like to remind the House of the adage, 'if you change the beginning of the story, you change the whole story.' This investment is, indeed, the beginning of a successful education journey for all the children in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government and the Ministry of Education recognises the continuous challenges faced by students needing special attention. We acknowledge the allocation of \$1.1 million that will enable the Ministry of Education to explore essential resources for teachers to effectively identify and support students with special needs. This reflects our unwavering commitment to creating a truly inclusive learning environment and ensuring accessibility for all identified students with special needs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are students with special needs in schools, like autism, physically challenged, reading disorders and many more that the Ministry of Education is working hard to identify resources so that these students can be identified at an early age and be given a proper assistance and guidance.

This is working towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal 10 - Reducing Inequalities. The provision of this budgetary allocation will empower all our children with special needs, including those with disabilities, to gain an education, increasing their future employability and independence, and reducing the likelihood of discrimination. At the moment, there are 13 special schools around Fiji with teachers who are supposed to be teaching in normal schools, there are no special inclusive teachers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Education's Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Department is actively reforming our education system to create inclusive, innovative and alternative pathways for our children, and we are thankful for the increased allocation of \$6.56 million, as compared to \$1.8 million in the previous year. This will allow the phased implementation of Education

Perfect Online Platform in Fiji secondary schools. We are currently operating 54 vocational schools, with plans for additional 10 centres in the new financial year. These targeted efforts are designed to ensure that Fiji produces skilled workforce that directly meets the country's economic demands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we encourage students under the TVET programmes to explore the micro qualification programmes offered by TSLS. The Ministry of Education acknowledges the great contribution of the outgoing TSLS Chief Executive Officer, Dr. Hasmukh Lal.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many of our school buildings are ageing, with the wear and tear impacting the safety and the quality of learning environment. They have withstood challenging weathers in the past, and this year's allocation of \$8.7 million will greatly address repairs and maintenance, rebuilding of teachers quarters and infrastructures around Fiji. We are also acknowledging the report by DFAT on the audit taken in the Suva-Nausori corridor which highlights classroom overcrowding and the need for more appropriate WASH facilities to be constructed in 45 schools around the Suva-Nausori corridor.

We acknowledge that preliminary work is already underway for the construction of three new schools - Vatuwaqa Primary School, Suva Primary School and the new Davuilevu Secondary School, with funding from DFAT.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also acknowledge our strong partnership with the UAE Red Crescent Authority, who continue to assist us with the construction of two duplex teachers quarters for each of these three schools - Ratu Simione College, Lautoka Methodist College and Sigatoka Methodist College. We are in the final stages of signing this agreement with UAE authorities, aiming for completion by the end of December. With God's grace, Phase 2 of this vital project will then begin, further advancing the People's Coalition Government's vision, and on the same note, I convey my sincere appreciation to our UAE partners.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are rescoping and retendering the Kadavu Provincial School project which has been left incomplete from 2022 due to contractual and monitoring issues. The Ministry of Education is also looking to respond to the expression of interest from the *vanua* for the establishment of new secondary schools, subject to the current Ministry of Education criteria. We anticipate to establish new secondary schools in the West, in Namara in Yasawa, Vuniyasi and Nawaka in Nadi, Namuka and Naweni, Tokaimalo, Naqali, Tacirua and Nakorosule, to name a few.

Mr. Speaker. Sir, all of these are expressions of interest received from the *vanua* to the Ministry of Education, and we are currently doing the groundwork and feasibility studies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are currently being confronted with termite infestation in the Western schools and we are thankful for UNICEF for providing temporary tents for classroom use. Sir, 44 schools in the Western Division were affected, with 11 schools severely affected. Currently, there are about two schools schooling under tents, that is, St. Thomas Primary and Lovu Sangam Primary.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the flexibility of the Free Education Grant use and fundraising provisions will allow schools to implement much needed infrastructure upgrades and improvements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are thankful for the 7 percent increase, amounting to \$423 million in SEG 1. This will allow for payments of teacher remuneration, including qualification and longstanding salary upgrades for experienced teachers who have served over 20 to 30 years and recognising qualification upgrades for others and statutory deductions as a retention measure.

The Ministry of Education will also undertake and continue to undertake professional development and working with stakeholders such as FTRA to provide the necessary resources. These

comprehensive measures are designed to attract and retain highly qualified and motivated teachers, ensuring quality education delivery across all regions, especially those underserved, thereby, bridging educational gaps linked to poverty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are happy with the student allocation that Government continues to give for students ranging from Free Education Grant, free textbook, transport assistance, Back to School Assistance, water tanks, boat and engines, boarding grants, menstrual hygiene management, food rations and remission of fees. This will ensure that students do come to school to continue their learning journey and pathways and finish their journey to become better citizens of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the total number of students currently enrolled in schools from Early Childhood Education (ECE), primary and secondary schools, numbering around 242,959, as compared to 239,843 last year, an increase of 3,160 enrolled students. This shows that children are coming to school, and we hope and pray that more students will continue to be enrolled with this 2025 budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while only 1.7 percent of the students are involved in drug-related incidents, mainly involving tobacco products, like *suki* and cigarettes, the Ministry remains concerned about the rising trend from 2020 to 2023 with 3,627 cases in 2023.

In response, the Ministry, in collaboration with the National Substance Abuse Advisory Council and other stakeholders, continue to conduct annual awareness programmes and is prioritising the re-engagement of school chaplains to address social issues such as drugs, truancy, bullying and teenage pregnancy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has received \$50 million for the next financial year for transport assistance initiative, including a 50 percent government bus fare subsidy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to strengthen internal controls and governance for this significant budgetary allocation to the Ministry, the Ministry is currently reviewing its Transport Assistance Policy. This review will also be conducted with other relevant Ministries to ensure transparency and accountability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, we are building a resilient education system that is resistant to climate change, termite-proof, drug-free, and we are empowering every child to access quality education through this budget. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support this 2025-2026 Budget.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- 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 I also acknowledge those who are sitting in the gallery and those watching via livestream from the comfort of their homes; I rise today in this august Parliament to lend my full support to the 2025-2026 National Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to extend my sincere well-wishes to the *Vanua o Lau* and to the newly-installed *Turaga Bale na Tui Nayau, na Tui Lau, na Sau ni Vanua ko Lau*, Ratu Tevita Kapawai Uluilakeba Mara, as he takes up this sacred mantle of leadership. Sir, I wish to congratulate honourable Inosi Kuridrani on his return to Parliament. Welcome back, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a proud Member of Parliament and a member of the Standing Committee responsible for overseeing the invaluable natural resources, I am entrusted with the vital task of scrutinising matters related to forestry, agriculture, mining, environment, fisheries, water and marine services. This includes conducting investigations, inquiries and making recommendations on various aspects, such as administration, legislation, budgets and policy.

I am deeply committed to serving our people with integrity and compassion. The voters who entrusted me with their hopes, dreams and future have given me a profound responsibility. I vow to honour their trust in working tirelessly to build a Fiji that we can all be proud of today and for generations to come. Their faith in me fuels my passion to strive for a better, fairer and more resilient Fiji, where everyone's voice is valued and everyone's wellbeing is prioritised.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are moments in history when a new generation, especially those in positions of leadership, are gently but urgently called upon to shape our nation through rebuilding, renewal and fresh perspectives. Those moments invites us to come together around a shared vision, one rooted in compassion and hope, that strives to create a better and more inclusive country for all our citizens. It requires us to embrace new principles that will touch the lives of our people today and lay a foundation for a stronger and more secure future for the generations to come. Ultimately, that future is already in our children's hands, carrying the responsibility of the choices that we make today with care, humility and deep sense of duty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe that true leadership is rooted in kindness and a genuine desire to uplift our fellow citizens. The vision and dedication of our Government, guided by our honourable Prime Minister's inspiring leadership, have brought us this far. With this Budget, we stand on the shoulders of those who have worked tirelessly – farmers, teachers, civil servants, health workers and countless others, whose sacrifices and devotion continue to build the foundation of our nation. We owe it to them and to all our people to keep moving forward with hope and compassion.

The message from the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance is clear about our direction - we need a budget that honestly reflects our current situation and creates opportunities for growth. It should ensure fairness in the economy, so everyone has a chance to succeed in the future.

Some critics say this Budget lacks excitement and flashy promises. While everyone is entitled to their opinion, I believe this year's Budget is focused and purposeful. It aims to achieve important goals that will help build a stronger, better Fiji.

The current Government is working hard to overcome the challenges left by the previous governments, especially in supporting rural, remote rural and maritime island communities to participate in business. To achieve this, they are addressing issues like governance, infrastructure, market and financial management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, people in these areas need modern tools and knowledge to keep up with the new technologies and business skills. These connections are vital for speeding up development and improving efficiency across the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to address my voters and the nation today regarding the effort of the Government to support our country during these challenging times. We recognise that many families are facing increased costs of living, which affect their daily lives and overall wellbeing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in response, the Government has introduced several measures to provide relief. We have reduced taxes and tariffs on essential goods such as food, medicine and fuel to make them more comfortable for all families. We are also implementing targeted social welfare programmes to support our vulnerable population, ensuring that no one is left behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are committed to transparency and accountability, making sure that resources reach those who need them the most. Our goal is to alleviate financial burdens, promote economic stability, and ensure that every Fijian has access to basic necessities like food, healthcare and education.

We remain committed to working diligently to improve the standard of living for all citizens. Building a stronger, more resilient Fiji is a shared goal. We will continue to listen to your concerns and take proactive steps that benefit the entire community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government is deeply care about the future of our children. That is why we are making significant investments to support them. Our \$40 million Back to School Assistance Programme, along with ongoing \$200 assistance for students, reflect our commitment to ensure that no child is left behind when it comes to accessing quality education.

I wish to acknowledge the dedicated work of the honourable Minister for Education, whose leadership and commitment have been instrumental in driving these initiatives forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a clear testament to our belief that education is the foundation for a stronger, brighter nation. We have also allocated \$65 million for the free education grant, benefiting more than 225,000 students across Fiji.

Moreover, over 84 schools have been renovated, repaired and upgraded to create a better learning environment. We have dedicated \$86.5 million to support higher education institutions and \$153 million for tertiary schools, opening doors for more young people to pursue their dreams.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in recognising the importance of early childhood development, we are funding Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers on a full-time basis because we understand that investing in our children's early years is crucial for their future and our nation's wellbeing. Our efforts come from a heartfelt desire to nurture and uplift every child, ensuring they have the best opportunities to succeed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, good news to all individuals travelling by bus every day - you will benefit from a 10 percent reduction in fares, making daily commutes more affordable for families across Fiji. This simple yet impactful measure reflects the Coalition Government's strong focus on improving the everyday lives of our citizens and easing the financial burden on hardworking families.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to help our hardworking farmers and leaseholders, the Coalition Government is offering a 30 percent lease premium subsidy - up to \$7,500, for those earning under \$50,000. That will assist them with lease renewals and support agricultural growth. The government's efforts to improve the agriculture sector shows how much we understand its important role in Fiji's economy and food security.

The Coalition Government has allocated \$25 million to support our vulnerable communities through free water, medicine and a 50 percent electricity subsidy, showing our commitment to social justice and accessible services. We have also eliminated the tax on frozen fish, including salmon, significantly reduced taxes on chicken parts and lamb, to make nutritious food more affordable. These actions reflect our dedication to improving the lives of all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the Minister and his Ministry for their dedicated work in supporting our rural and maritime communities. Government has committed \$39 million for infrastructure and coastal protection, and \$10 million for water access initiatives. These efforts aim to improve living conditions, ensure safety, and build an inclusive Fiji where no one is left behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our farmers and the sugarcane industry remain a top priority for Government. We are proud to announce a record high cane price of \$105 per tonne, which will directly benefit our hardworking farmers. This significant increase reflects our strong commitment to supporting this vital industry.

For low income families, the Coalition Government is offering grants of up to \$30,000 to build their first home, promoting home ownership and stability. We are also formalising informal settlements, granting lease titles and expanding VAT refunds for home construction, solar systems and repairs - all to make housing more affordable. These efforts show the Government's commitment to inclusive growth and creating better living conditions for everyone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to pay my deepest respects to the late former Minister for Agriculture for his visionary leadership and unwavering dedication to the Ministry. May his soul rest in peace.

The \$115 million increase in funding for agriculture shows our Government's strong commitment to food security, supporting rural communities and diversifying the economy. By helping farmers with lease renewals, mechanisation and crop research, we aim to empower rural areas, improve productivity and promote sustainable agricultural growth for the future. These initiatives show our commitment to creating a strong, sustainable and prosperous agricultural sector - one that supports the wellbeing of our people and the future of Fiji. We are dedicated to doing more and working hard to support our farmers and rural communities, who are the backbone of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this budget reflects the Government's strong work ethic, clear vision and caring policies. The leadership shown by our Government inspires confidence both, at home and abroad. Their dedication to building a resilient, inclusive and prosperous Fiji remains steady. This Budget is proof of their hard work, foresight and commitment to the wellbeing of all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge the people of Fiji to take full advantage of this opportunity. The Coalition Government is here to serve you, and we believe this Budget shows our careful plan to support development, promote sustainable practices and improve the lives of those who depend on our natural resources. The increased funding and targeted projects highlight our dedication to progress and sustainability in these important areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my seat, I wish to address all citizens of Fiji. I want to speak directly to each and every one of you listening today via the Walesi, Fiji Parliament *Facebook* Live and to all who will later hear this message. The Government is committed to supporting our people, and right now, there are numerous forms of assistance available to help uplift your standard of living. It is time for us all to take that step forward, apply for the help that is rightfully yours.

The 2025-2026 Budget has been carefully designed with you in mind. It aims to provide support, create opportunities and help families, entrepreneurs and individuals to thrive, but to benefit from this support you may need to take the first step. Some of you may feel that the Government is not doing enough, but I ask you, have you ever registered your business? Have you filled out the necessary forms? Have you visited the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Fisheries, Ministry of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Housing, Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development, Ministry of iTaukei Affairs or other Government offices to seek advice or assistance?

Today, more than 72 percent of people in Fiji use *Facebook*. I encourage you to visit our online pages. You can learn new things, ask questions, and find out about the help we offer. Whether online or in person, the doors are open. The truth is, you are not being left behind. You are choosing to remain behind. Success, progress and opportunity do not come to those who sit passively at home or complain on social media. It is time to step out of your comfort zone. Stop making excuses! Come into the real world! Visit our offices, ask questions and seek advice. The Government is ready to help but you need to show up. Today, you have a choice - stay where you are and watch others succeed, or step forward, take action and become part of your success. The help is here, all you need to do is engage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with your permission, I would like to speak in the vernacular.

Ni sa bula vinaka na noda dauniveiqaravi ena vei valenivolavola kece era qarava na noda veiyasana – Komisina, Turaga Roko, Roko Veivuke, e kei ira tale na i vakalesilesi ni matanitu. Sa kerei tiko na noda veitauri liga vata ena kena qaravi na noda lewenivanua lomani o Viti. Sa tiko na veivuke kece ena veitabana kece ni matanitu me baleti keda na lewenivanua eda tiko ena vanua ni cakacaka, vei koro voleka, kei na colo ni noda vanua, kei na veiyanyanu, e rawa ni vueti kina na noda bula na kawa iTaukei. Sa kerei na nomuni veivakararamataki yani vei ira na lewenivanua ena noda veiyasana mera raica na veivuke cava e tu ena matanitu ka ganiti ira mera vukei kina, ka dusi vei ira na gaunisala me muri mera na rawata kina.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the Budget presented by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance. I thank his team at the Ministry of Finance - the Permanent Secretary, Director Budget and the entire Budget Team. *Vinaka vakalevu* and God Bless Fiji.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 4.06 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.40 p.m.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and to the people of Fiji; good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise with deep respect in this esteemed Parliament with a profound sense of responsibility to speak in full support of the 2025-2026 National Budget tabled in this House by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics on 27th June this year. This is not just a Budget, it is a declaration of our intent, a reaffirmation of our commitment to the people of Fiji and a decisive tool to drive transformative health outcomes. At the core of this Budget is the recognition that a healthy population is the greatest asset any nation can possess. Without health there is no productivity, no sustainable development and no future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services has received a total of \$465.6 million in this budget. This substantial investment is a clear vote of confidence in our health sector and a workforce that powers it. This funding will cover salary for doctors, nurses, allied health professionals, procurement of essential medicine and biomedical equipment, upgrade and maintenance of hospitals and health centres across Fiji and delivery of quality health services to the people of Fiji. This is not just an allocation, it is a strategic investment in the foundation of our public health system. It ensures that the tools, team and technologies are in place to provide a reliable and equitable healthcare throughout the country.

The Ministry, together with the Government of Australia through its renewed, improved and elevated Vuvale Partnership, has made significant progress towards one of the most transformative health projects in our nation's history. We are now embarking on a plan for the construction of a new hospital to complement the over a century-old Colonial War Memorial (CWM) Hospital.

A Clinical Services Plan has been developed, providing robust projections of Fiji's health needs over the next 10 years, 20 years and 30 years. The proposed hospital will expand its bed capacity from the current 453 beds to 703 beds, and is envisioned to serve not only Fiji, but the broader Pacific as a regional referral hub. This \$2 billion project is a symbol of the Coalition Government's forward-looking approach.

Government is currently evaluating seven potential sites, including Davuilevu, Tamavua, Raiwaqa, Samabula, Valelevu, Nabua and the existing CWM site, to ensure optimal accessibility and service coverage across the Suva-Nausori corridor.

A modern health facility requires modern infrastructure, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This Budget continues to invest in improving our ageing key hospitals and health centres. Therefore, \$10.8 million is allocated to the redevelopment of CWM Hospital. This \$6.8 million increase from last year's budget to the CWM Hospital is both, timely and strategic. This allocation will directly support urgent infrastructure work, enhance the emergency care facility, and ensure frontline workers have the support they need to provide timely and quality healthcare services.

Mr. Speaker, Labasa Hospital which is our Northern Division's main referral facility receives an additional \$3.6 million boost in this budget. This is critical in expanding its reach and ensuring that no Fijian in the North is left out when it comes to urgent medical care.

Mr. Speaker, our national psychiatric facility, St. Giles Hospital, receives an additional \$1.77 million. For too long, mental health has been under-resourced and stigmatized. This budget is a clear declaration, we will no longer treat mental health as an afterthought. It is part of our core strategy for

national wellbeing and meeting demands for mental healthcare.

Mr. Speaker, \$8 million is dedicated to the refurbishment and major renovation facelift of Vunisea Hospital in Kadavu and Taveuni Subdivisional Hospital. This is in partnership with DFAT. A further \$6.4 million under capital construction supports the continued upgrading of Savusavu Hospital, Labasa Hospital, Tamavua Twomey and construction of a fit-for-purpose Dreketi Health Centre in the province of Macuata, and a new Tokaimalo Health Centre in the Tikina of Saivou in the province of Ra.

For the first time, Mr. Speaker, funding for all major infrastructure works will be directly implemented by the Ministry of Public Works to fast-track and streamline project delivery, an important shift towards operational efficiency and accountability. This is a strategic move to ensure faster scoping, technical experts advice, project execution, improved accountability and timely completion of all capital projects for the Ministry of Health and Medical Services (MOHMS). We are not just building hospitals, we are building trust, we are building dignity and we are building for the next generation.

This Budget also strengthens our Public Private Partnership (PPP) model. Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$117.2 million is allocated for the continued operation of the Lautoka and Ba Hospitals under Health Care (Fiji) Pte Ltd. This PPP, facilitated by International Finance Corporation (IFC), is currently under review to enhance cost-effectiveness and service delivery.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Health Care Fiji is expected to begin construction of an additional 200-bed in Lautoka Hospital, a significant capacity expansion for the Western Division.

Mr. Speaker, the Free Medical Scheme has expanded access to vital health services for low-income earners, social welfare pensioners and chronic dialysis patients. It now partners with over 64 private providers, including general practitioners, dentists and laboratories. To ensure continuity and expansion of this essential initiative, a further \$10 million is allocated in this Budget.

Mr. Speaker, the Coalition Government's commitment is clear, no Fijian should be denied access to essential medical and dental care because of poverty. This \$10 million allocation is a bold reaffirmation that health is a right, not a privilege, and we will not allow our most vulnerable to fall through the cracks. This initiative brings effective and efficient healthcare services to eligible Fijians, which is timely, convenient and compassionate. We care, and this budget proves that.

Government has also increased its Kidney Dialysis Subsidy to \$4.7 million, allowing more Fijians to access life-saving dialysis treatment. Additionally, \$3.9 million is allocated as an operating grant to Sai Prema Hospital, which provides life-saving cardiac surgeries for children under a PPP arrangement. These allocations prove that we are not just investing in hospitals, we are investing in human lives.

Mr. Speaker, Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) remain our nation's greatest health threat. They account over 80 percent for most premature deaths, they account to more hospital admission and they also account to chronic suffering in Fiji. We have witnessed firsthand how diabetes-related amputations, heart disease, stroke and cancer continue to devastate families, diminish our workforce productivity and also affect our national economy.

This Budget increases the allocation to the Wellness Division to \$1.99 million. These funds will be directed to practical, evidence-based interventions - establishing healthy setting in schools, workplace faith-based groups, villages and settlements; scaling up screening programmes; and strengthening public education around the four major NCD risk factors of unhealthy diet, physical inactivity, tobacco use and excessive use of alcohol and kava consumption. We are not just treating NCDs, we are disrupting the habits and environments that cause them, through rigorous interventions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in today's interconnected world, disease outbreak can travel faster than ever. The Health Protection Division is tasked with constant surveillance of infectious disease. The \$1.36 million increase for this Division in this budget will enable better surveillance, smarter data analytics and faster outbreak response whether it is another wave of COVID-19, a regional pandemic or a localised outbreak. We will continue to collaborate with WHO, our regional neighbours, and our local medical experts to maintain real time disease monitoring systems and strengthen early warning mechanisms. This investment ensure that Fiji remains prepared for any future outbreak, whether local or global. This Budget ensures that we are not caught unprepared.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have heard the concern of our people regarding inconsistent supply of essential medicine. This Budget responds to the call for us to continue to improve on our delivery. A total of \$61.4 million has been allocated to the Fiji Pharmaceutical and Biomedical Services and this ensures continued access to essential drugs, vaccine, laboratory reagents, consumables and emergency stock.

The removal of VAT related inflation in procurement costs reflect fiscal prudence. Additionally, the shift of HIV-related commodities to the Ministry of Health Headquarters ensures programmatic efficiency and centralised oversight. We are building resilience into our supply chains through stronger procurement systems, better warehousing and the mSUPPLY system that is helping track, monitor and manage resources at the facility level. A health system is only as good as its supply chain. This Budget ensures that our people have what they need, when they need it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are not walking alone in this journey. I acknowledge and thank our development partners - UN agencies, foreign governments, NGOs and technical experts, who continue to work closely with us to improve health outcomes for all Fijians, whether it is through support of infrastructure, technical training, telemedicine or specialist deployment, our partnerships are essential and we are committed to nurturing them with transparency and shared purpose. We are also expanding collaboration with our faith-based organisations, community health workers, *Nasi ni Koro* and traditional leaders to ensure that our programmes are people-centred and culturally respected.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget makes clear the Coalition Government's unwavering commitment to universal health coverage - healthcare that is accessible, affordable and available to all, regardless of where you live or your income. The decentralised outreach programmes, divisional empowerment and targeted health investments reflect a deliberate strategy to leave no one behind. From the most rural or maritime islands to the heart of our cities, this Budget is about fairness, equity and justice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services has been entrusted with significant resources in this Budget. As Assistant Minister, supporting the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services in this budget utilisation, I do not take this responsibility lightly.

With a total sector allocation of \$465.6 million, new hospital projects worth \$2 billion, expansion of specialty care and PPPs, and firm commitment to equity and universal health coverage, this Budget lays a strong foundation for a healthier and more resilient Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, I offer my full and unwavering support to the 2025-2026 National Budget. Let us move forward decisively with unity and purpose for a healthier, stronger and more resilient Fiji.

Vinaka vakalevu, Mr. Speaker, and may God Bless Fiji.

HON. T.R. MATASAWALEVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, imagine a master who entrusts his wealth to his servants, saying: "Multiply what I have given you, and at my return, I will command you." This powerful analogy perfectly encapsulates our role and responsibility as a Member of Parliament with the

passing of this Budget. Like the faithful servants described in Matthew 25, we are entrusted with the stewardship of our nation's resources, and it is our duty to manage them wisely and with a heart full of service and compassion. May we always respond with wisdom, foresight, and a genuine desire to uplift every citizen of this great nation, Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, to the people of Fiji, our beloved nation and to all Fijians watching the live broadcast and those present in the gallery this evening; *ni sa bula vinaka*.

It is with humility and a sense of duty that I stand here today to express my views, and to be the voice of the people from Wainibuka, Tailevu North, Nakorotubu, Nalawa and Saivou in Ra. I thank you for this opportunity to raise issues that are critical to the development and wellbeing of our communities.

Ni sa bula vinaka saka na Turaga na i Liuliu ni Vale ni Boselawa; nu bula vinaka na Turaga na i Liuliu ni noda Matanitu, kei keda na mata digitaki eda tiko ka vakayacora na noda vei qaravi vaka i dadedabe vakaboselawa.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today, I wish to bring to the attention on this august House several pressing issues that require our immediate and sustained focus. These issues are not mere statistics or figures, they are the lived realities of our people - families, children and communities and who rely on us to advocate, act and to deliver tangible solutions.

On the infrastructure and essential services in Nakorotubu, Ra, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the most urgent matters facing our constituents in Nakorotubu, Ra, is the need for proper infrastructural development, especially in the areas of electricity, roads and water supply.

The EFL grid extension from Wailailai, Bucalevu, Nakorotubu in Ra and Sovusovu Settlement requires serious attention. The stretch from Mataso to Naocobau, in particular, is problematic. Many families in this area still lack reliable access to electricity which hampers their daily lives and economic activities. I humbly request that urgent action be taken to complete this extension which will significantly improve the living conditions and economic opportunities of our people.

Mr Speaker, Sir, furthermore, I wish to highlight the critical needs for an Irish Crossing at Toki Village in the interior of Nakorotubu. During the rainy season, the river becomes impassable, isolating families, especially school children, who are forced to cross the dangerous water to attend school on the main road. This is unacceptable - the safety and accessibility of our children must be prioritised. I call upon the relevant authorities to expedite the construction of a safe Irish crossing or bridge to ensure safe passage for all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while discussing roads, I want to emphasise the urgent need for the construction and upgrading of the road connecting Navuniivi Village, Nayavuiria Village and Nasau Village. These three villages and surrounding settlements are amongst the last in the Ra Province without proper road access. Currently, residents rely solely on boats for transportation, which is neither safe nor reliable, especially during adverse weather conditions. Upgrading this road will facilitate easier movement, promote local commerce, and improve access to health and education services.

On infrastructure accessibility in Saivou and Tailevu North, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in Saivou, Ra, the village of Nararavou urgently needs an Irish crossing to ensure safe and reliable access to its residents. Additionally, the road from Tokaimalo District to Nananu Village and outwards to Yaqara require immediate construction and improvement. These routes are vital for daily movement, economic activities and access to essential services. Their current condition hampers the progress of our people.

On water security and community wellbeing, Mr. Speaker Sir, access to clean drinking water is a fundamental human right, yet many of our communities still face shortages and inadequate facilities. Tonia Village in Tai Vugalei, for example, continues to lack clean and safe drinking water. This issue must be addressed as a matter of urgency to prevent waterborne diseases and improve health standards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition, our police stations and barracks are the backbones of our security and law enforcement. The Police Station and barracks in Korovou, Tailevu, are in urgent need of renovation and expansion to ensure our officers can serve effectively and safely. Our police personnel work tirelessly and maintain peace and order - they deserve proper facilities.

Mr. Speaker Sir, furthermore, the people of Namau Village in Tailevu North, have been waiting patiently for compensation for the water catchment installed by the Water Authority of Fiji for the last eight years. It is unfair for our citizens to face delays in receiving rightful compensation, and I urge the responsible authorities to resolve this matter properly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, energy is the backbone of development. I humbly request the honourable Minister to extend the EFL power grid to Namarai and Nadavacia Villages in Nakorotubu, Ra. Reliable electricity will transform lives, improve education, support small businesses and change the overall quality of life of our rural communities.

On the resilience and transformation of our farmers, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also want to acknowledge the remarkable resilience and positive shift in mindset among our farmers. They have shown adaptability and determination, despite numerous challenges. It is encouraging to see how they are embracing new methods, seeking support and contributing significantly to our economy. We must continue to support and empower them with resources, training and access to markets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in closing, I want to emphasise that while this Budget provides the foundation of our nation's future, it is the only starting point. We must approach all critical questions, scrutinising and ensuring that every dollar spent benefits our people. We need to consider innovative and inclusive measures that uplift the most vulnerable and marginalised groups. Our collective goal must be to build a Fiji where every citizen has access to essential services, opportunities and dignity they deserve.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand here today with full support of the 2025-2026 National Budget, confident that with unity, diligence and shared visions, we can achieve progress that benefits all Fijians. *Vinaka saka vakalevu* and God bless Fiji.

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; *ni sa bula vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today in full support of the 2025-2026 National Budget presented by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics. This Budget is not only a reflection of the Coalition Government's maturity, stability and vision, it is a strong reaffirmation of the Coalition Government's commitment to inclusive development, equity and resilience, particularly for our rural and maritime communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the weight of expectations from our rural and maritime population is real. The voices are calling for better housing, better infrastructure, better network coverage, safer water, improved access to markets and greater resilience to climate threats. This Budget delivers on those expectations by continuing to fund and expand key rural development initiatives that have a direct measurable impact on the daily lives of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we acknowledge that hard decisions like increasing VAT, corporate tax and departure tax in our first year in Government were necessary to stabilise public finances and for sustaining public debt. However, it is equally important to note that the burden was eased for our rural poor through zero-rated essential items and continued funding for social protection. Fiscal responsibility in our context must work hand-in-hand with rural sensitivity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the exemption of 22 basic items from VAT and increased social support payments have had a tangible impact on rural households. For communities with a limited cash flow and access to markets, such places are not just economic, they are crucial for daily survival and dignity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the reduction in duty in certain sources of protein - chicken portion and offals from 32 percent to 15 percent and frozen fish from 15 percent to zero percent, whilst maintaining the low duty or duty-free on some commonly used fruits and vegetables. We want to encourage our people to improve on their daily diet intake when there is a wide range of relatively cheaper but nutritious options to choose from.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Ministry's role in national debt sustainability may seem indirect, but in truth, every well-implemented rural development project prevents future costs, whether in disaster relief, urban migration process, or health spending. By investing wisely in resilient communities now, we reduce the fiscal burden later.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, rural and maritime areas are often the first to feel the shocks of global instability, whether through supply shortages or rising transport costs. This Budget's anticipatory approach is commendable. It allows our Ministry and the National Disaster Risk Management Office to plan ahead and safeguard communities in vulnerable locations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I wish to commend the Government for the allocation of \$39.4 million to the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management in the next financial year. I am pleased to note that this budget continues to support our key flagship programmes, including the:

- (1) Rural Housing Assistance Programme;
- (2) Rural and Outer Island Development Programme;
- (3) Self-Help Programme;
- (4) Community Access Roads, Footpaths and Footbridges Programme;
- (5) Seafaring Entrepreneurial Assistance Programme;
- (6) High Risk Water and Sanitation Programme;
- (7) Evacuation Centre Programme; and
- (8) Emergency Water Supply Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we express our sincere appreciation for the continued and increased allocation towards some of these initiatives. This is a clear reflection of the Coalition Government's commitment to create a fair, inclusive and people-centred development pathways. No matter how remote you live in Fiji, this is what it means to leave no one behind, not just in words, but in practical budgetary commitments.

On economic empowerment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the allocation of \$0.9 million towards the Self-Help Programme in the upcoming fiscal year. The Self-Help Programme continues to empower communities by placing development in their hands, encouraging economic empowerment initiatives, ownership and partnership with Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the allocation of around \$0.3 million towards the Seafaring Entrepreneurial Assistance Programme will enable the Ministry to continue to support small-scale economic activities in maritime island communities, including the revival of inter-island trade fisheries and transport businesses. These maritime livelihoods are not only part of our cultural identity, but are also vital to local economic and food systems.

On Climate change initiatives, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government has outlined a comprehensive approach to planned relocation in the fiscal year 2025-2026, rooted in the broader context of national resilience and adaptation to sudden and slow onset challenges. The Budget emphasises the urgent need to address the impacts of climate change, particularly in response to communities and areas on the frontlines of rising sea level and increased weather-related risks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the allocation of \$1.3 million for coastal protection works at Naselai Village in Nakelo, Tailevu is both timely and critical, given the growing threats posed by climate change. These works are an adaptation measure towards climate-induced coastal erosion and focusses on adaptation options as responsive measures in place of planned relocation as a last resort.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of its commitment, the Government is also working with international partners to secure more substantial and better quality climate finance, aiming to support most vulnerable communities from environmental threats. The planned relocation initiatives are embedded within the new National Development Plan, which was shaped through extensive public consultation and is set to guide major investment projects, including those focused on climate adaptation and community resettlement.

Currently, the Climate Relocation of Communities (CROC) Trust Fund is being used to support the ongoing planned relocation of Nabavatu Village in Macuata.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, global events may be beyond our control, but our resilience lies in how we are prepared to respond. For our Ministry, this means ensuring that remote communities have early warning systems, evacuation centres and access to relief during disasters. The Budget's ongoing support for disaster preparedness is a vital tool in protecting lives and livelihoods, especially in our outer islands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we acknowledge with appreciation the allocation of \$1.1 million to the Ministry for the construction of evacuation centres. This is a timely and vital investment in our national disaster preparedness efforts, particularly for our rural and maritime communities, which are often the most vulnerable and hardest hit during national disasters. This allocation will allow the Ministry to continue constructing multi-purpose climate resilient evacuation centres in vulnerable communities, ensuring that the most at risk are not only better protected, but are also better prepared to respond and recover when disasters do strike.

On Civil Service welfare, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Civil Service remains the backbone of Government's delivering machinery and their welfare is central to our efforts in building a high performing, people-centred public sector. In this Budget, we are pleased to acknowledge the provision of a 3 percent salary increase for all civil servants. This well-deserved pay adjustment reflects our recognition of the critical role that our public officers play in service delivery and policy implementation at all levels.

Government also continues to invest in improving living conditions for civil servants through the maintenance and upgrade of Government quarters, especially for those to rural and maritime areas. A total of \$3.6 million has been allocated for upgrading and enhancement of staff quarters administered by the Ministry. I understand that other Ministries such as the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways, Fisheries and Forestry are also being allocated money for this purpose. These investments are essential

for supporting our frontline officers and ensuring they are well equipped and accommodated to serve communities effectively, regardless of their location or remoteness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the Government for its ongoing efforts to ensure that our civil servants are supported with a conducive and well equipped working environment that enhances their productivity and service delivery. In this regard, I note with appreciation the allocation of \$0.9 million for the upgrade and enhancement of the Ministry's headquarters in Suva, as well as \$3.2 million allocated for the upgrade of the Commissioner Western Division's headquarters in Lautoka. These investments are essential in strengthening the operational capacity of our Ministry and ensuring that our teams are well resourced effectively to serve the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also warmly welcome the allocation of \$0.7 million for the procurement of an operational mobility vessel for the Ministry. This investment is critical to strengthening our reach and presence in the maritime zones where accessibility remains one of the most significant barriers to effective service delivery. The vessel will greatly enhance our Ministry's capacity to respond swiftly during disaster operations, deliver development assistance and conduct monitoring and coordination activities across our island communities. It is a practical and much needed resource that will directly support the Ministry's mandate in ensuring no Fijian is left behind regardless of geography.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry welcomes the allocation of \$0.8 million for our District Advisory Councillors' monthly allowances and administrative costs. We are working on the appointment of the Councillors to serve for the next two financial years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note that the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs has an allocation of \$3.4 million for *Turaga-ni- koro* and *Mata ni Tikina* allowances. These allowances create an atmosphere whereby communities are allowed to formulate their social contracts for development, supporting the SDG 16 mandate in enhancing democracy in rural Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2025-2026 National Budget is a strategic instrument that continues to speak directly to the needs of our rural and maritime communities from housing to health, access roads to evacuation centres and grass-roots leadership to climate adaptation. The provision made in this budget affirms a government that is listening, planning and acting deliberately and compassionately to meet the expectations of our people, especially those in the most remote and vulnerable parts of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I conclude, please, allow me to read some of the comments in relation to the 2025-2026 National Budget after the first reading by the honourable Minister for Finance on Friday, 27th July, 2025. First, the honourable Leader of the Opposition labelled the 2025-2026 National Budget as satisfactory but stresses the importance of maintaining a balance between expenditure and income, given the high debt level and deficit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Consumer Council of Fiji welcomed the 2025-2026 National Budget as a timely and decisive response to the financial strain felt by thousands of consumers across the country. The Consumer Council CEO, Mrs. Seema Shandil, described the budget announcement of the reduction of VAT from 15 to 12.5 percent as a move set to ease financial pressures across the economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS) has welcome the reduction of VAT to 12.5 percent, increase in social welfare assistance and funding for the Ministry of Rural Development as it responds to some of the concerns from citizens. While speaking to *Fiji Village* news following the 2025-2026 National Budget announcement, Fiji Council of Social Services Executive Director, Ms. Vani Catanasiga, says in terms of reduction of bus fare by 10 percent, the Government is beginning to realize the experiences of ordinary citizens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there many more commentaries regarding the support of this Budget but because of time constraint, I only wish to highlight a few and the support received from the wider cross section of the society in regards to the Budget which overrides the negative comments from the other side of the House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the honourable Assistant Minister responsible for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Risk Management, I join my honourable Minister in reaffirming our Ministry's full commitment to the successful implementation of this Budget and ensuring that every dollar allocated brings us closer to a more equitable, secure and forward-looking Fiji. In a nutshell, this Budget will surely alleviate poverty amongst our midst.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you very much and the honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations for allowing me to speak, as I have to meet the Prime Minister of Niue in the next half an hour from now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of the House, ladies and gentlemen; *bula vinaka, sat sri akaal* and *namaste* to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my response to this Budget is as follows. Firstly, I must commend the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Strategic Statistics for delivering a budget that is bold, inclusive and forward-looking. In the face of ongoing international conflicts, delicate trading conditions and unpredictable global economy, this Budget is carefully crafted to promote resilience and fairness at its core.

As rightly stated by the honourable Minister during the Budget delivery, we are not immune to those global shocks, but this Budget shows that we are ready to respond and to stand strong as a nation. This is a budget for all Fijians, regardless of ethnicity, gender, age or background. It brings together all corners of our society with one shared purpose - to build a more prosperous, inclusive and resilient Fiji.

On the 2025-2026 Budget for the sugar industry and the Ministry for Multi-Ethnic Affairs, we welcome the 2025-2026 budgetary allocation of \$79 million. This is a clear affirmation of this Government's strong and continued support to our sector. It empowers us to build on a solid foundation where we have established sustained momentum and deliver meaningful results for our communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I address the specific allocation of \$72.2 million towards the sugar industry in this year's Budget, I wish to first provide some context by highlighting the key global trends that are currently shaping the sugar industry worldwide.

The global sugar industry today is valued at \$66 billion to \$70 billion, with projection estimation that it will grow between \$102 billion to \$121 billion by 2030-2033. The market remains heavily influenced by government subsidies, quotas and export controls, particularly in dominant regions like Brazil, India, the United States and the European Union (EU).

In 2025, the global sugar production is expected to reach record levels, with Brazil, India and Thailand leading the way forward. However, despite this abundance of global sugar, the market is experiencing significant volatility.

In Pakistan, the government has been forced to import 500,000 tonnes of sugar to ease severe domestic shortages after earlier exporting a significant volume. Kenya has shut down several sugar mills due to a shortage of sugarcane, leading to rising prices and food insecurity. The Philippines faced a major crisis just last year, importing hundreds of thousands of tonnes of sugar due to poor harvest. Even in the

EU where beet sugar dominates, several sugar mills have closed and beet acreage has declined by 9 percent. India, the world's second-largest sugar producer, is now reducing sugar exports to focus on ethanol, creating potential ripples in the global supply. Those are not isolated events, Sir, they are signs of a sector under pressure from climate change, erratic rainfall, rising input costs, market distortions and shift in land use.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I share these examples and figures today to make one point clear, that Fiji is not alone. The challenges we face in the sugar industry, from production to profitability, are part of a larger global trend. However, understanding this global context gives us strength, and it shows us that we are not isolated, and that solutions are within reach if we act decisively and collaboratively.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us now turn our attention to the Fijian sugar industry, an industry that was once the backbone of our national economy and, more recently, a resilient lifeline during the COVID-19 pandemic. When other sectors came to a standstill, despite its historic and ongoing contribution, it continues to face criticism and scrutiny, often without a full understanding of the immense challenges it endures, or the serious efforts being made to transform and revitalise.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us not forget our urban centres, thriving businesses and the key infrastructure we built on the backbone and the spillover of this very industry. I ask this august House, how can we now turn our backs onto the very foundation that it was built on?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, last year, the sugar industry was allocated \$70 million, later revised to \$79 million. In return, it generated \$235.2 million in export earnings in 2024. More importantly, the revenue did not just appear on paper, it flowed directly into our local economy, creating jobs, sustaining livelihoods and driving small town and big town commerce.

I invite honourable Members of this House to visit Vaileka, Tavua, Ba or Labasa during the cane payment days, to witness the surge of economic activity. Shops still run on cane payment sales, and many families still plan weddings and major events around the cane payment calendar. That is how deeply this industry remains woven in our social and economic fabric. As someone who understands both the numbers and the realities on the ground, I say with confidence that this is not a burden. This is a wise and a strategic investment in our people, into the economy and our future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I outline our strategy moving forward, allow me to shed light on the significant budgetary allocation made to the sugar sector. This funding is not just a number on paper, it represents a continued commitment to supporting and strengthening the backbone of our rural economy.

The allocation will sustain and enhance critical programmes that are the lifeline for our canefarmers. These include the ongoing Fertiliser Subsidy and Weedicide Subsidy, the Sugarcane Development and Farmers Assistance programme, the Cane Cartage (Penang to Rarawai) - FSC subsidy and the maintenance of cane access roads, all vital to ensuring that the wheels of our industry keeps turning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am proud to state that under this Coalition Government, we have strengthened and expanded, and scaled up to reach even more communities and deliver greater impacts. We have also introduced new initiatives in the previous years, and we have already shown results towards some motivated farmers. For instance, the:

- Farm Incentive Programme has motivated 3,208 growers this year to increase their cane production by providing \$5 for every additional tonne of cane produced. We intend to assist another 3,500 farmers in the coming financial year.

- Manual Harvesting Support programme has helped ageing farmers and those facing labour shortages to continue farming with the support of \$3 per tonne to subsidise manual labour. This year, we assisted 7,786 farmers and anticipate the same number in the coming year.
- Most importantly, the New Farmers and Lease Premium Assistance programme has given confidence to the next generation to join and remain in the industry. We have assisted 482 farmers to date, and this year, we plan to assist another 100 farmers.

In fact, this programme has performed so well that I am pleased to inform this august House that the Ministry of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics will also roll out this Programme to all other farming sectors from this year. This is a powerful signal that land security and agriculture remains at the heart of our development agenda and economic development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I warmly welcome the formation of the Special Parliamentary Committee on Sugar which will be chaired by the honourable Prime Minister. This important step reflects the Government's serious commitment to the sugar industry. Earlier when honourable Pillay and honourable Bala spoke about bipartisan, we are genuine, and that is why we have included the honourable Leader of the Opposition to be in the Committee and, of course, the leader of G11. However, the indication that I got from the two honourable Members is that, they want to be in the Committee. I will tell you one thing, the only reason they are not in the Committee is because they are not from any party. You have to be a member of a party!

What I am saying is that these are some indications. When coming inside, I told the honourable Leader of Opposition, "Be careful. You will be replaced by these two in the Committee."

HON. P.K. BALA.- You are a joke!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- You are the joke!

As I have said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I warmly welcome the formation of this Parliamentary Committee. The honourable Prime Minister is serious, the honourable Minister for Finance is serious, and we are all serious on this side. If anyone has destroyed the sugar industry, it was the FijiFirst Government, who sold the Rakiraki Mill for \$300,000.

(Hon. P.K. Bala interjects)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Daylight robbery under your government!

(Hon. P.K. Bala interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Bala, you are a very senior Member of Parliament. When you address someone, you address me as Chair, or else I will issue you with a yellow card right now! Now, behave yourself!

Can you, please, continue, honourable Minister.

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

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me now outline our strategy, but first, I wish to bring to your attention some striking data of the 2023 sugarcane production. This data is not just numbers, it is a mirror of our sector's structure, its strengths and the areas that require urgent intervention and support.

In the 2023 season, a total of 10,680 farmers supplied approximately 1.5 million tonnes of cane. However, the production data reveals a critical imbalance in output across farmer categories. Nearly half of all farmers (4,876) produced less than 100 tonnes of cane and contributed to only 15 percent of the total cane supply. In contrast, those producing between 100 and 300 tonnes of cane formed the backbone of the industry, accounting to over 50 percent of the total cane production. At the upper end, a small group - 10 percent of farms, produced over 300 tonnes of cane, contributing to an impressive 32 percent of the national output. Notably, only 20 growers produced more than 1,000 tonnes of cane, yet they alone contribute 3 percent of the total production.

(Hon. R.R. Sharma interjects)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Can you listen? You are not a farmer, you are a kid.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, sugar is fundamentally an export crop. Only 20 percent of what we produce is consumed locally, while the vast majority is destined for international markets – 5 percent regional and 75 percent international. This is an important reality we must all understand. We are producing a global commodity, and we are competing on the world stage. That means that the industry must operate with a commercial mindset.

To survive and thrive, we need to be competitive, and this is where the strategy must focus. We must move towards greater commercialisation, improved productivity and smarter investment. Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, all that means confronting some hard truths - not every grower may be able to sustain production under the modern market driven conditions. As difficult as it is, we may need to support a transition away for some, while helping others to scale up and succeed.

To prepare for this new era, I have directed the newly appointed Permanent Secretary for Sugar Industry to lead a comprehensive structural transformation across all key components of the industry - the growers, institutions and the miller. The objective is clear - to drive the industry towards full commercialisation and long-term sustainability.

We are going to transform ongoing programmes to ensure that we can support the farmers to move into the next tier to become sustainable. Where improvement is unlikely, we will work closely with the Ministry of Agriculture and other line agencies to transition these farmers into alternative livelihoods, such as livestock or other crop farming, so that they are not left behind.

At the same time, we will intensify support for our middle tier farmers, those who are producing 100 tonnes to 250 tonnes, to help them scale up into commercially viable enterprises. These farmers have greater potential to drive economic growth, improve industry efficiency and form the core of the modern, resilient and competitive sugar economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our goal is to increase sugar production by 200,000 tonnes annually over the next five years. This will be supported by the reintroduction of early-to-mid-term maturing cane varieties in the Western Division.

We have reset our production target, aiming to grow from 47 tonnes per hectare with a 10 percent annual increase. Some farms have already started achieving over 70 tonnes per hectare, and research shows that yields of up to 150 tonnes per hectare is possible.

Our immediate priority is to stabilise and boost sugar production before we move towards product diversification. While ethanol and sustainable aviation fuel remains on the table, it is crucial that we first strengthen our production base to ensure long-term viability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the industry is working closely with the Sugar Research Institute of Fiji (SRIF) to drive innovation and smart solutions. Sir, SRIF is finalising a new cane variety for large-scale mills and the trials are in the next season. We are ready to release updated fertiliser recommendations, which was last released two decades ago, and new herbicide molecule to improve farm production and sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite the age of our mills, they are performing reasonably well this year. We thank the Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC) staff, who were tasked with the ongoing preventative maintenance. Sir, \$18 million capital investment is underway to replace the ageing plants and auxiliaries across the three Mills, reducing major breakdowns and risks. At Rarawai Mill, preparations are progressing well for the installation of a new auxiliary cane carrier to boost capacity for mechanically harvested cane, along with planned upgrades to steam generation for more stable crushing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to improve communication and ensure farmer issues are addressed more effectively. We will soon be launching a dedicated toll-free farmer helpline. This dedicated service will offer farmers with a direct and reliable service for support or feedback, and timely assistance across all sectors in the industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have plans to undertake a comprehensive review of the Master Award, with a view of modernising its provisions. We are already discussing models, like Costa Rica's. Mr. Speaker, Sir, next month, the honourable Prime Minister will launch the first ever Prime Minister's Sugarcane Farmer of the Year Award - a landmark event honouring the heart and soul of our sugar industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me now address the budgetary allocations to the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic¹ Affairs. With time constraints, Sir, I will not be able to cover, so I will table the rest of my speech to the Secretary-General. With that, I support the budget.

HON. A. D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, members of the public in the gallery and those watching or listening from home and elsewhere; *bula vinaka and namaste*. I rise today to commend the Coalition Government and the honourable Minister for Finance, on the delivery of the 2025-2026 National Budget, with the theme: "Building Security, Stability and Prosperity".

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to first pay tribute to my colleague and close friend, the late honourable Vatimi Rayalu, a dedicated Minister who led by example, and who strongly believed in outcomes, not in inputs. He was a person who was a 'go-getter'. He made things happen. May his soul rest in eternal peace in the heavenly abode. In the same breath, let me also welcome honourable Kuridrani, my new neighbour, and I wish him well during his parliamentary sessions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget has been lauded and welcomed by members of the public as it focusses on the lives of every individual, with deep understanding of our nation's needs. It is not merely a financial document, it is a blueprint for a more prosperous, equitable and employment rich Fiji. Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the perspective of my Ministry, this Budget is a beacon of hope and opportunity. It directly addresses the critical need for sustainable job creation, skills development and enhances worker welfare which are the cornerstone of our national progress.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the substantial allocations towards infrastructure development will, undoubtedly, stimulate economic activity and generate a multitude of new employment opportunities. These projects are not just about roads, bridges, or utilities, they are about connecting our people to

¹ Editor's Note: Continuation of the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry's response which was tabled and appended as Appendix 2.

markets, education and to a better quality of life, simultaneously creating jobs for our skilled and unskilled workforce.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am particularly heartened by the increased investment in education and vocational training. Under the FijiFirst Government, vocational and technical education was totally destroyed, not forgetting that between \$30 million to \$34 million went down the drain in setting up the technical colleges which were later abandoned, all of a sudden. Technical centres attached to secondary schools were also closed due to the opening of Technical Colleges, and the sudden closure of Technical Colleges left a gaping gap in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). That is history. It will remain there, it cannot be obliterated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, employers are still crying, wanting skilled labour, and we have to import labour to cater for their needs. I know some people are talking about funding Pacific Polytech, but these are the very people who are responsible for the destruction of technical education in this country. At least, Pacific Polytech has rescued some Technical Colleges and is producing thousands of skilled people. It is no secret that 95 percent of the students of Pacific Polytech, are iTaukei. Many of them have nowhere to go after leaving school from Year 10, Year 11 and Year 12.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Pacific Polytech has produced 1,399 students with certificates in TVET areas and 2,500 persons with micro-qualifications. This year, over 1,500 students are already enrolled in Certificate 3 and Certificate 4. Sir, it is better to keep them in technical colleges or institutes and upskill them to secure jobs than to allow them to remain idle and engage in drugs and crime.

This Budget recognises that a skilled workforce is the backbone of a thriving economy. For the first time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, an allocation of \$4,500 scholarships has been provided to TVET. The Fiji National University has graduated 1,300 students with TVET qualifications in 2024. For 2025, the number is expected to rise significantly.

The emphasis on upskilling and reskilling our labour force will ensure that our Fijian people are not only ready for jobs of today, but are also equipped to seize the opportunities of tomorrow, especially in emerging sectors. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this commitment will bridge the skills gap and enhance the employability of our youth and those seeking new careers.

The Budget's focus on supporting small and medium enterprises (SMEs) is another critical win for employment. Sir, SMEs are the engine room of our economy, providing vital jobs and fostering innovation. The proposed incentives and support mechanisms will empower these businesses to grow, expand and hire more Fijians. This is direct job creation at the grassroots level, strengthening our communities from within.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the continued commitment to social protection initiatives underscores the Government's unwavering dedication to the welfare of all Fijians. A secure and healthy workforce is a productive workforce. The provision in this Budget will also provide safety nets for our most vulnerable, ensuring that as our economy grows, no one is left behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the allocation for social pension increased in the 2023-2024 Budget by 15 percent and 25 percent respectively for those aged 65 years plus and 70 years plus. A further increase of 5 percent in this Budget brings the total increase to 18 percent and 28 percent in two years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget reflects a holistic approach to national development, while economic growth is intrinsically linked to social progress and employment generation. It is a Budget that empowers our workers, supports our industries and invests in our future. It is a Budget that fully puts the Fijian people first.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry is committed to achieving building security, stability and prosperity through the various services that we deliver. Our National Employment Centre is working closely with the Ministry of Education and other key stakeholders in strengthening technical vocational education to meet the growing demands of the labour market, including the development of Fiji's National TVET Policy.

The Fiji Volunteer Service has been supporting the re-engagement of 31 retired teachers as school counsellors for the last financial year and, again, in this financial year. A total of 119 graduate volunteers were placed with local host employers in the current financial year, as part of the capacity building towards full time employment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the additional financial support of \$267,300 in the new financial year for the Formal Employment Service will ensure that we continue to promote and support our local employers by providing them with platforms, such as job fairs, where local employers can conduct walk in interviews with our unemployed citizens. This initiative has been a resounding success, and the Ministry will continue with this in the new financial year, creating pathways for unemployed Fijians for local employment opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, remittances contributed significantly to Fiji's economic growth in 2024. The substantial increase in total inward remittances increased by 6 percent, reaching a remarkable \$1.33 billion. This figure is expected to further grow by 7 percent, reaching \$1.4 billion in 2025.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with our Labour Mobility Programmes under our bilateral arrangements with both Australia and New Zealand, recording 10,500 workers in Australia and over 4,600 in New Zealand, since its inception until May 2025, labour mobility is a significant contributor to Fiji's high remittances. On this note, I would like to acknowledge the honourable Minister for Finance for supporting our request to strengthen our service delivery on the ground.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last two and a half years, we have made sure that we only allow unskilled workers to join the workforce that is going abroad under the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) Scheme and the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) Scheme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we took over this Ministry, we inherited 42 unfilled positions. I must thank the honourable Minister for Finance for providing budgetary allocations in the last two years to fill all these positions and ensure that our Ministry has a full complement of staff to be able to deliver.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to acknowledge the continued support from the Australian Government in funding an additional Country Liaison Officer (CLO), which will bring the number of CLOs to four in Australia where the Fiji Government is funding two and the Australian Government is funding the other two.. On the same note, I must also acknowledge the New Zealand Government for supporting Fiji under the RSE Programme by providing funding to recruit the first-ever CLO for New Zealand and strengthening our RSE team.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we came into Government, there was not a single CLO. Despite Australia's offer to fund one from 2021, we failed to advertise and fill it. Our CLOs play a very important role in relation to the welfare of our workers, through pastoral care, and also promoting Fiji in both, Australia and New Zealand. This is a testament of the Coalition Government's commitment to ensuring that the welfare of our workers, while they are abroad, is not compromised.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government has restored workers' rights that had been curtailed for the last 14 years, culminating in a stronger voice for the workers and their representatives on employment policies. We have restored the tripartite forum. We are reviewing the Employment Relations

Act to provide better protection and employment standards for workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government decimated the trade union movement. I must repeat this because they must be reminded of this, union density was reduced from 35 percent to a mere 9 percent. Union leaders, of course, were harassed, arrested, detained and given all sorts of treatment that was inhumane.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we increased the minimum wage by 25 percent within 12 months, not in dribs and drabs, as was done in the past. Civil servants have not received a pay rise from 2017 to 2024, that is, seven years. Our Government increased their pay by 7 percent to 20 percent in 2024, and in the 2025-2026 Budget, another 3 percent is allocated. This brings the total to 20 percent to 23 percent. Never in history, Mr. Speaker, Sir, have civil servants received such an increase without a job evaluation exercise. The only time they received a higher salary than this was when there was a job evaluation exercise.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Go and check history.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government imposed contractual appointments on civil servants, giving the civil servants a sense of insecurity and serious anxiety. There are numerous examples of contracts not being renewed for just speaking up or speaking their mind. Ten union leaders, who were also civil servants, were demoted for speaking their mind whilst representing their unions legitimately. The retirement age was reduced from 60 to 55 at a very short notice - a very serious problem that was faced by those who suddenly retired while they were expecting to go another five years. Some passed away due to heart attack.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers were paid hourly for five hours a day, like casual workers. They will now enjoy equal status with normal salaries like any other teacher. I wish to thank the honourable Minister for Education for correcting this and many other anomalies that have been in existence for over a decade. Thank you, Sir. I am also aware that he is working with the teacher unions to correct other similar anomalies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the past, union leaders were hardly ever welcomed to enter Marela House. Now, I see that the unions are working hand in hand with the Ministry to develop education. They are development partners, they are no longer adversaries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Hem Chand is very much aware of this because he was a senior staff of the Ministry during those days and we shared many, many experiences. He was a good colleague.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has received \$5.68 million to support the second batch of payouts for the Vatukoula Gold Mine workers. Each eligible worker or the dependent of a deceased worker will receive a payment of \$15,000, as committed in the last Budget announcement. This will bring the total payout to \$25,000 per worker.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, furthermore, the Workers' Compensation legislation has been reviewed and the Work Care Bill is undergoing further scrutiny and consultation by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Economic Affairs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government has increased the allocation from \$6 million to \$7 million for processing of employment and school accidents under the existing no-fault compensation until the Work Care Bill is passed. Honourable Joseph Nand had some questions, so I invite him to put those questions for us to answer in the next sitting of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have also reviewed the Health and Safety legislation on workplace inspections compliance to support the potential business owners and investors in reducing the total turnaround time to obtain the necessary licences and approvals to start their new businesses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the budget support towards good-faith dialogue through the mediation services ensures an alternative dispute resolution mechanism that is accessible, efficient, effective and transparent. It reflects a deliberate shift towards a proactive peaceful employment dispute resolution, favouring prevention over adjudication.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my seat, let me allude to all what the Opposition has been saying. When the first reading was done, Sir, I met many of them at the corridors of this Parliament and they said, “A very good Budget”. I can name them. Do you want me to name them?

HON. P.K. BALA.- Yes.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- I will not name them, they are good friends of mine. Only to come here and say the opposite.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they refuse to recognise all the good things that are in that Budget. There are numerous, the list goes on, they have all been spelt out by this side of the House, but they will not acknowledge it. Yes, they will not acknowledge it. That is the behaviour that we experience from the other side of the House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my seat, I wish to take this opportunity to commend all my Ministry staff for their commitment and dedication throughout this financial year. Their hard work, dedication and perseverance have not only contributed to our success, but also has been recognised during the Civil Service Day, as we proudly received the Best Service Standards Award and secured the position of First Runner-Up for the Best Overall Excellence Award. These awards are a testament to the exceptional efforts of our management team and staff, and my heartfelt gratitude to each of them for their contribution, which have played a pivotal role in achieving this remarkable milestone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members, I thank you all, and I reiterate my full support for the 2025-2026 Budget. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament; I rise to contribute and provide my support to the 2025-2026 National Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I contribute to the Budget debate, I extend my well wishes and that of my family, the Ministry of Justice, and the Attorney General's Chambers and our affiliate agencies. *Na vakarokoroko kei na vakanuinui vinaka ena kena sa mai cava vakavinaka na soqo ni veivagunuvi vei ira saka na Turaga na Tui Nayau, Tui Lau, Sau ni Vanua o Lau, kei na vakanuinui vinaka na kena tomani ka laveti cake na nodra bula na wekada ena yasana vakaturaga o Lau. Malo na vakadrakai. Vakanuinui vinaka saka vei kemuni na Gone Turaga na Tui Lau.*

[I express my heartfelt well wishes on the esteemed occasion of the traditional installation of the *Turaga na Tui Nayau, Sau ni Vanua o Lau*. My best wishes to our kinsmen in Lau as they enter this new chapter, and of the advancement and development of their Province. Thank you very much and, again, my heartfelt well wishes to the *Gone Turaga na Tui Nayau*]

I also like to express my sincere condolences to the late Minister for Agriculture and Waterways, honourable Vatimi Rayalu, and his solid and no-nonsense performance. We dearly miss him in this august House.

Moce mada na wekaqu Tui Vanua. (Farewell my friend Tui Vanua) To his dear wife Vasiti Rayalu, *vinaka vakalevu na veiqaravi cecekia* (thank you for your dedicated service). To the children, honourable Rayalu carved and left a legacy for all honourable Members of Parliament, to live a life of service to the people.

I congratulate the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, and his hard-working Ministry for delivering a well-planned and inclusive 2025-2026 Budget - one which underscores the strength, maturity and stability of the Coalition Government with the theme, “Building Security, Stability and Prosperity”.

I would also like to acknowledge the hardworking staff of the Office of the Attorney-General, particularly the legal drafters, who worked tirelessly around the clock on the Budget Bills. I also acknowledge all stakeholders for their commitment in contributing to this Budget.

This Budget is more than a financial plan, it reflects the Government's unwavering commitment to our people and the foundational value that all Fijians are equal before the law. From urban centres to the most remote villages and communities, from the elderly to our children, this Budget ensures that no one is forgotten or invisible.

The VAT reduction and the continued protection of zero-rated essential items are not just fiscal adjustments, they are legal and moral acts of compassion, aimed at easing the burden on our most vulnerable citizens. I welcome these measures as they reflect the Government's responsibility to uphold social justice and support the most affected by economic pressures. These bold and deliberate decisions are essential for safeguarding our community.

This Budget is rooted in good governance, transparency and respect for the law. It demonstrates that we can be socially progressive while maintaining fiscal responsibility. Strong institutions, sound financial management and inclusive policy making, are the key to building national resilience. This is how we strengthen our democracy, not by suppressing voices, but by uplifting our people and governing with fairness, integrity and respect for the law.

I wish to respond to the statement made by the honourable Leader of the Opposition that Cabinet Ministers ought to be significantly reduced, and that Permanent Secretaries can “run the show”. For the information of the honourable Leader of the Opposition, Cabinet Ministers are elected to have the authority and the mandate of the people. While Permanent Secretaries have the skills and expertise, they do not have that mandate. Also, Cabinet Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament represent diverse backgrounds and are better suited to debate on issues affecting our people. One thing is for sure, that this side of the House aims to stay here for four years and another four years and another four years. However, for the honourable Leader of the Opposition, if you want to leave, the door is open. Please, proceed so.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the Office of the Attorney-General, let me address a few key issues. The Office of the Attorney-General is central to the legal machinery of the Government. With a total allocation of \$9.5 million - a \$2 million increase, this budget enables the Office to expand its legal team and improve the legal service delivery across litigation, advisory and legislative drafting. This is not business as usual, it is a conscious investment in rebuilding the quality, independence and responsiveness of public legal services.

To put that into perspective, the Office of the Attorney-General currently manages over 1,200 active litigation files, covering a wide range of complex areas of law, all overseen by a team of 25 lawyers. In terms of advisory legal services, including commercial legal work, we have processed over 1,800 requests for vetting of contractual documents. The same team of lawyers who handle litigation files also manage these requests.

Based on a Cabinet decision, the Office of the Attorney-General instituted an advisory appeal proceeding in the Supreme Court, relating to the amendment provisions of the 2013 Constitution. The court hearing is scheduled from 18th to 22nd August this year, and Cabinet submissions will be delivered by Kings Counsel, Mr. Brad Walker.

A critical pillar of legal and justice reform is ensuring that our laws are well-drafted, modern and accessible. The Legal Drafting Section which contains nine lawyers, continues to lead in translating Government policy into clear, effective and enforceable laws.

The Budget supports transformative improvements, and we are also grateful to the Vuvale Partnership with Australia for its continued technical assistance to the Office of the Attorney-General and the Ministry of Justice.

Moving forward, we will continue to prioritise, strengthen and upskill our Legal Drafting Team for enhanced delivery of Bills and subsidiary laws. The Office of the Attorney-General continues to maintain and update the Laws of Fiji's online platform, now hosting 360 principal legislation and 1,821 subsidiary laws. These ensures transparent and accessible laws to the public.

The Budget also ensures that the Office of the Attorney-General continues to provide secretarial and legal support to several key statutory offices and bodies, which play a vital role in maintaining good governance, legal oversight and public service delivery. These include the:

- (1) Constitutional Offices Commission;
- (2) Mercy Commission;
- (3) Fiji Intellectual Property Office;
- (4) Liquor Licensing Board;
- (5) Board of Legal Education; and
- (6) Film Censorship Board.

We are also proud to be hosting the Commonwealth Law Ministers Meeting in February next year for the very first time. This is a historic opportunity to show leadership on issues relating to law and justice. This Budget allocates \$560,000 for the event and preparations that are already underway.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will also convene the Pacific Legislative Drafters' Committee Conference in September this year. This is another step in strengthening regional solidarity and building capacity to produce laws that are inclusive, clear and enforceable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Law Reform Commission continues to play a pivotal role in modernising our legal system, ensuring that Fiji's laws reflect current realities, are consistent with democratic principles and meet the evolving needs of our people. Law reform is not just a legal exercise, it is a national building tool. Through a deliberate and inclusive process, the Fiji Law Reform is delivering on its mandate to simplify, update and ensure that the laws reflect the will of the people.

Recently, the Commission led the electoral law reform of 2025 under the theme, "An Electoral System for the People from the People. This review marks a significant step in our ongoing efforts to strengthen democracy and ensures that our electoral system truly reflects the voice and needs of all

Fijians. Its work also involve nationwide consultation, reaching all Divisions, including Rotuma, and involving our local languages.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to say that the final report of the review of the Education Act 1966 was officially handed over yesterday to the honourable Minister for Education. This review will form legislative changes to support inclusive and high quality education.

The Legal Aid Commission is allocated a budget of \$12.1 million, a 2.3 increase from the current financial year. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Legal Aid has made significant strides over the past year. It maintains 24 offices, with plans for additional office in the maritime areas, and handles 19,874 active files with an average of 159 files per lawyer, reflecting the growing demand for legal services.

The Legal Aid is also planning to undertake a successful digitisation of civil litigation procedures and development of an online case management system to enhance service efficiency and accountability, including the introduction of centralised VoIP system and enabling a real time communication across all its offices.

The Legal Aid has also carried out awareness programmes to 68 high schools, reaching over 27,472 students, along with community outreach of over 2,534 students and involving 16,143 legal education initiatives in various universities.

On the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC), Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to report that Fiji Corruption Perception Index improved significantly in February this year. Fiji scored 55 out of 100, ranking 15 out of the 180 countries globally, and 9th in the Asian Pacific region. Fiji is now the highest ranked Pacific island country after New Zealand and Australia.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FICAC has introduced three key reforms in the last month. A special taskforce was created to clear backlogs and prioritise active cases. The Corruption Prevention Department was closed and realigned to support investigations more effectively. An oversight unit was formed to strengthen internal performance tracking by implementing monitoring and evaluation, as well as compliance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FICAC continues to strengthen its regional partnership in fighting against corruption. It managed to sign three MOUs since last year. The latest MOU was signed in February of this year with the Anti-Corruption Commissioner of Tonga. Sir, FICAC also helped deliver several capacity building workshops across the Pacific in collaboration with donor agencies, such as UNDP, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Samoa and Tonga.

On the Human Rights Commission, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a new regional office in Labasa is scheduled to open later this year, ensuring accessibility to their services. The Commission will also facilitate the hosting of the 30th Annual General Meeting of the Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institution in November.

The Commission continues to contribute to national and international efforts by submitting independent reports to the United Nations, working closely with civil society and providing input on important pieces of legislation. It has also remained active in public awareness, in human rights education by conducting workshops, issuing press statements and participating in high level judicial discussions, including the recent advisory opinion referred to the Supreme Court by Cabinet.

On the Judiciary, it is allocated \$49.5 million, enabling it to uphold its core functions and progress its strategic objectives. Although the provision for capital construction purchase is limited, there is an

increase in operational funding. This allows the Judiciary to continue providing essential services across the country with efficiency, consistency and integrity.

Some notable progress noted from the Judiciary includes, the:

- (1) expansion of the workforce, including 24 new positions, in support of the new Ba court;
- (2) back to back sitting of the Supreme Court and the Court of Appeal, significantly increasing the disposal rate of pending cases;
- (3) review of the High Court rules are currently being undertaken by the Judiciary Internal Rules Committee to streamline case processing and disposal, and strengthen communication and collaboration with stakeholders to support a more responsive and coordinated justice services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to address the Ministry of Justice. The Ministry of Justice is allocated a total of \$9.3 million. This reflects the Government's trust in the Ministry's core functions and its commitment to modernising justice delivery in line with the Strategic Development Plan 2025-2029.

In this Budget, the Ministry will prioritise modernising justice delivery through digital transformation for its registry. This is a long overdue reform that will secure and streamline legal processes.

With support from development partners, particularly ADB, the Ministry received a technical assistance report outlining recommendations and a roadmap for the digitalisation of land titles and Deed information and processes in Fiji. This is divided into four key phases. This Budget provides funding for the implementation of the first phase, involving the preparation stage, including legislative planning with an expert recruitment, evaluation and decision support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the Register of Companies, the budget will enable investment in modernising the business registration system, enabling online company cooperation and improving regulatory compliance.

Likewise, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Official Receiver and the Registrar General's Office will move towards fully integrated digital platforms, ensuring greater transparency and better access to services. These efforts will also enhance data management, improve ease of doing business through partnership with key technical stakeholders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to further enhance insolvency laws, we are in the process of finalising the Insolvency Bill, which is earmarked to be tabled in the coming months.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is also a budgetary support for the Juvenile Diversion Programme under the Child Justice Act 2024. This allocation will enable collaboration with various Government and UN agencies, particularly UNICEF, to give young people the opportunity for rehabilitation before it is too late.

The Juvenile Diversion Programme will ensure that Officials from the Fiji Police Force, Social Services, Justice, iTaukei and the Judiciary, are properly trained to divert young offenders whilst holding them accountable for their actions. The programme also acknowledges the underlying issues related to offending behaviour, and will offer comprehensive support services to address those behaviours. Additionally, it will provide families with necessary resources to help the young people succeed in life.

In terms of our people, the budget will support training and deployment of Justice of Peace, particularly to remote and maritime communities where access to legal services remains uneven. For the

first time, Justice of Peace will receive allowance and administrative support under this Budget.

Additionally, 18 regional offices are planned to be strengthened, enhancing mobility for frontline staff. Through smart investment, digital innovation and strengthened front-line services, the Ministry is extending its reach from city corridors to the greater maritime area. Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP), an allocation of \$8.9 million reaffirms its vital role in safeguarding justice, national security and public trust. This investment supports transformative actions across key priorities, including enhancing the legal framework, deepening regional cooperation, modernising technology and infrastructure, and strengthening anti-corruption efforts and crime-fighting capacity.

The Office of the DPP will, for the first time, develop a strategic plan to set out long-term priorities, particularly in prosecuting corruption and boosting civil forfeiture efforts. Successful high-profile prosecutors have restored confidence in the rule of law, and we will continue to build capacity through targeted training for investigators and prosecutors.

On Electoral Commission and Fijian Elections Office, Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$475,400 will be allocated to the Electoral Commission and \$20 million to the Fijian Elections Office. This will ensure full readiness to the upcoming general elections, including voter registration, training of over 18,000 election officials and Civic Education Programmes that will empower every Fijian, especially in marginalised communities.

On the Fiji Corrections Service, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is an allocation of about \$62.5 million. This will support the redesign of correctional infrastructure, the expansion of intelligence operations and the revitalization of inmate rehabilitation. Importantly, the budget will also enable the establishment of a Parole Board to discharge its legal mandate, supporting a more rehabilitative justice framework.

In concluding, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is proof that good governance works. It reflects the Government's resolve to strengthen our democratic institutions, manage national debt, invest in people, and build a more just, inclusive and prosperous Fiji.

With this Budget, legal institutions under my portfolio will continue to strengthen and enhance the delivery of their services, whether it be drafting of Bills that are fit for purpose, adequate implementation of laws, the provision of sound and timely legal advice, adequate court representation, and efficient delivery of legal registries, ensuring good governance and respect for human rights and the rule of law.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, I support the 2025-2026 National Budget tabled by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance.

MR. SPEAKER.- Do you wish to speak, honourable Seruiratu?

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you allow me.

MR. SPEAKER.- Are you raising a Point of Order?

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Point of Order – Standing Order on Response to Misrepresentation. If you will allow me, I will explain. Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, go ahead – misrepresentation.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Thank you. The honourable Acting Attorney-General and Minister for Justice quoted from my speech yesterday, but that was the statement that was made by the honourable

Minister for Finance in his Budget Address in 2016-2017, so I was just giving it back to the honourable Minister for Finance. It was not my intention to put that across to the Government, but it was just his statement. I just want to explain that, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- That is correct. Honourable Siromi Turaga?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- I apologise for that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- That is accepted. I now call on the next speaker, honourable Tikoduadua.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen - *ni sa bula vinaka* and a very good evening to you all.

Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of the 2025-2026 National Budget. This is not just our third Budget as a Coalition Government, it is a reaffirmation of our promise to lead with courage, clarity and continuity. In the early days, many doubted us. Some said we would never last. Others predicted gridlock but through dialogue, discipline and determination, we have continued to deliver. Our Government has stayed the course. We have put our people first and we have laid down a foundation of hope and of stability. This Budget reflects a future-focused Fiji, anchored in security, driven by principle and lifted by purpose.

We came into Government not claiming perfection, but as Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, and I quote:

“Governments can err, Presidents do make mistakes, but the immortal Dante tells us that divine justice weighs the sins of the cold-blooded and the sins of the warm-hearted in different scales. Better the occasional fault of a government that lives in a spirit of charity than the consistent omission of a government frozen in the eyes of its own indifference.”

Mr. Speaker, we are not frozen, we are moving. And as Roosevelt also said that his generation had a rendezvous with destiny. I believe ours does too. Our destiny is to secure peace at home. Stand firm in the region and rise together as one nation committed to dignity and justice for all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are emerging from a difficult chapter in our democratic story. Fiji has known what it is like to be ruled by fear, by the dominance of two men, and by the erosion of institutions. But that era is over. We are building a new democratic culture, where the voices of the many rises above the ambitions of the few.

Our democracy is still young, still fragile, but it is growing stronger. Every consultation, every budget, every peaceful debate in this House is a small triumph for the people of Fiji. In this democratic renewal, the role of women and young people is essential. We must not only protect their rights but elevate their voices. In defence and security, that means creating new pathways for leadership.

On inclusion and service, a secure Fiji must be an inclusive Fiji. We are committed to building a defence and security sector that reflects the diversity and the strength of our nation. The rule of law remains the cornerstone of our security and governance.

The Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF), under this Government, continues to uphold that principle with discipline and honour. We are clear - civilian authority governs this nation, and the men and women of our military have accepted this with pride. We respect our Constitution and defend our democracy.

The RFMF will continue to have a vital and relevant role in Fiji's future. This includes not just military readiness, but also national resilience. That is why we are moving ahead with the Duavata Leadership Framework, allowing the RFMF to help train our traditional leaders and young people to lead with integrity, discipline and patriotism.

We have seen this in action. During my recent visit to the Middle East, I met with our peacekeepers serving under the United Nations and the Multinational Forces and Observers (MFO) in Sinai in Egypt. They serve not for glory, but for the principles of peace and for justice. From them, I was reminded that peace is not a gift, it is a responsibility, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and it must be taught, cultivated and defended.

This Budget supports that mission. We are investing in peacekeeping, in border protection and in veterans' welfare. We are funding the work that keeps our people safe and upholds our commitment abroad.

The development of the National Security Strategy and the National Security and Defence Review is a turning point in our national story. These are not just technical documents. They are a call to the people. We will not build security behind closed doors. We will take this vision across the islands to communities, chiefs, civil society and youth because real security is not imposed, it is shared.

We are also working on the Maritime Security Strategy, a blueprint to defend our oceans, our blue economy and our sovereignty. This is vital for food security, border integrity and regional cooperation. On this note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to reflect on the wider region. Security partnerships will continue to define our strategic posture. We are not aligned to anyone, to any one power. We are aligned to the interests of the Fijian people and that means, working constructively with all our partners.

We thank Australia and New Zealand for their unwavering support. Australia in particular, remains a vital partner under the renewed and elevated Vuvale Partnership. As the honourable Prime Minister has said, this is not about control, it is about cooperation, friendship and about partnership.

We also welcome the growing role of India in the Pacific. India has shown deep respect for our sovereignty and has brought not just resources, but relationships built on trust and shared heritage. From defence training to humanitarian assistance, their footprint is growing and rightly so. Our partnerships are global - France, Japan, United States of America, Indonesia, China and others. Each brings something different. Each, when guided by transparency and mutual respect, can contribute to our collective peace.

I also wish to inform this House that discussions on the direct recruitment of Fijians into the Australian Defence Force are well underway. This is a forward-looking initiative with the potential to change lives and deepen our security ties. The Ministry of Defence is working in close co-ordination with the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Labour, the RFMF and the Australian Government to ensure that we get this right. It is a pathway to opportunity, skills and service.

The Ministry of Defence is evolving. We are moving from being reactive to being strategic. From quiet administration to active engagement. We are now the central agency for security coordination across Government, and we will continue to build capacity in policy, intelligence, veteran care and regional engagement. We serve the nation, and we are ready to do more.

Let me also take a moment to reflect on our traditions and the strength that they provide. The recent installation of the *Tui Nayau*, a deeply symbolic moment for the *Vanua o Lau* and to Fiji, carries national importance. When our traditional institutions are affirmed and respected, our unity as a nation is strengthened. The security of our country is not just physical, it is cultural, communal and spiritual. When we honour our chiefs and the *vanua*, we reinforce the values that hold us together as Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you will allow me, may I, on my behalf and on behalf of my family, I would like to wish *Na Gone Turage Bale na Tui Nayau, Sau ni Vanua o Lau, Na Tui Lau*, a very close friend of mine, Roko Tevita Uluilakeba, prayers and blessings on his installation as the paramount chief of the *Vanua o Lau* and the people of Lau. I have intimately known this young chief for almost 40 years. We go a long, long way back, and I want to share this with you. I hope that one day he will listen to this speech and he will also hear someone will tell him.

When we were doing our officer cadet course, one day we came back and in this same course was the honourable Leader of the Opposition and I. We were trying to get a short commission into the Republic of Fiji Military Forces back in 1988. So, after we did our wash up, we were sharing a *tanoa* of *yaqona* and talking to the young chiefs who were in the room. There were three of them, including Roko Ului, and we shared with him that his name may be Mara, but we told him on the day, that that day is his legacy, and it is his legacy that I would like to wish upon my friend to build his legacy as being the newly installed chief of Lau. I want to leave with him a word from a very famous Fijian who spoke to the Great Council of Chiefs on 6th June, 1997, the late honourable Justice Jai Ram Reddy. This word, I would like to leave *Na Gone Turaga Bale na Tui Lau Sau ni Vanua ko Lau, Turaga na Tui Nayau* and I quote honourable Reddy's speech when speaking to the chiefs:

“Chiefs of Fiji, with the greatest respect and humility, I submit that you chiefs are not just for Fijians, but for all the people of Fiji.”

With that goes my best wishes and that of my family to Roko Ului and his family, and I wish him all prayers and blessings as he leads the people of Lau into the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we look to the future, let us also remember those who have worked with us. I want to acknowledge the late honourable Vatimi Rayalu. He was more than a colleague to me, he was a friend to all of us. A gentle soul with a firm commitment to the land and the people, and his absence will be deeply felt.

We must also continue the national conversation about reconciliation, truth and healing. If you are to be a strong democracy, we must face our history and forge unity, not through silence, but through understanding. The process of truth and reconciliation must be continued, so we leave no wound ignored and no injustice forgotten.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I return to the vision of our honourable Prime Minister – the vision of peace. It is more than a rhetoric; it is our original offering and our destiny. A Fiji that is not just neutral, but active in building peace. A Pacific that is not a chessboard, but a sanctuary. This Budget strengthens that vision. It supports the people who make it real, from soldiers to teachers, from veterans to villagers.

To all our development partners, Australia especially, I say thank you, *vinaka vakalevu*, not only for your generosity, but for your respect. I would also like to thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and the dedicated team behind this Budget. Their tireless work, clarity of vision, and the commitment to service have made this national statement of priorities possible.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I conclude, this is a Budget for security, stability, and for the next generation. Hopefully, through this Budget, they will be able to live in peace. I commend this Budget to the House with my support.

MR. SPEAKER.- As a Lauan, I am deeply touched by your sentiments on our chief. Thank you.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition,

honourable Members of Parliament and fellow citizens who are watching on TV and social media; *ni sa bula vinaka* and a very good evening to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today not only to comment on the 2025-2026 National Budget, but to reflect on the journey that we have undertaken as a nation, one marked by resilience, reform and renewed hope. This Budget, the third assented by our Coalition Government is more than a fiscal document, it is a statement of intent, a blueprint for transformation and reaffirmed by our shared values.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must begin by acknowledging the turbulent global environment in which this Budget is framed - geo-political tensions, particularly in the Middle East and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic which continues to disrupt the supply chains, inflate costs and challenge small island nations like ours. Yet Fiji has chosen not to retreat in the face of adversity, instead we have responded with clarity, purpose and boldness. This Budget is practical and deeply measured response to extraordinary circumstances, reflects our commitment that protect our citizens, support our businesses and strengthen our communities.

Mr. Speaker, allow me to commend the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics for delivering a responsible, inclusive and forward- leaning budget, that reflects our Coalition Government's unwavering commitment to good governance, economic resilience and security, stability, service delivery and prosperity.

Cost of Living, one of the most significant and welcomed messages in this Budget is the reduction of VAT from 15 percent to 12.5 percent effective from 1st August. This bold decision, Mr. Speaker, Sir, delivers \$250 million in direct tax relief, in addition to the \$250 million already provided through the zero-rated VAT on 22 essential items, that is, \$500 million in total relief, a lifeline for families struggling with rising costs. Moreover, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government has introduced the VAT refund for first time home builders up to \$120,000.

Residential and solar projects and repairs to termites at damaged homes, this initiative, Mr. Speaker, Sir, not only is financial burden but also promote sustainability and resilience.

I rise today to respond and shed light on the measures and initiatives for the Office of the Prime Minister on the 2025-2026 Budget. I am honoured, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to support the honourable Prime Minister in the execution of duties in my portfolio within the Office of the Prime Minister.

We are meeting challenges head-on despite continued impacts from crisis including climate change and external conflicts, we are working towards our vision of rebuilding our future together for a resilient Fiji. We can see this clearly in our budgetary allocation in implementing a targeted approach towards building security, stability and prosperity.

The Office of the Prime Minister welcomes the Budgetary allocation for 2025-2026 fiscal year which recognises the strategic role the office plays in leadership and co-ordinating the whole of government policy, driving national development and ensuring the delivery of government priorities with efficiency and integrity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the total allocation for the Office of the Prime Minister for the 2025-2026 fiscal year stands at \$8.7 million which represents a 69 percent decrease compared to the previous financial year. The decrease was mainly due to the movement of departments and portfolios that were previously under the office in the 2024-2025 Financial Year. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, be rest assured that the current allocation will be utilised to fully support the leadership of the honourable Prime Minister and the coordination of policy delivery across government which is integral to supporting the leadership of the Office of the Prime Minister.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the Prime Minister's leadership, the office has worked diligently to translate the government priorities into actionable programmes. With this budget, we will:

- (a) Foster good governance and accountability by improving systems for policy tracking and performance monitoring;
- (b) Strengthened policy coordination and monitoring across ministries to ensure delivery of key national targets, particularly under the Fiji National Development Plan 2025 to 2029 and Vision 2050;
- (c) Provision of some coherent policy advice to the honourable Prime Minister and the Cabinet under Section 91 and Section 92 of the Constitution of the Republic of Fiji and have a vigilant oversight of national policies and high visibility engagement across the civil service in pursuit of government objectives;
- (d) Advance on the issuance of development grants and coordination of funding for community development projects, particularly in rural areas and the outer islands.

This Budget strengthens the office capacity to drive the whole of government coordination through our central role in Cabinet affairs, inter-ministerial collaboration and stakeholder engagement, we will continue to ensure that government policies are harmonised, efficiently executed and focused on results.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the office is also responsible for the implementation of small grant projects whose aims are to improve the lives of all Fijians particularly those that reside or live within the rural areas, including the outer islands. I am pleased to inform this august Parliament that within this financial year, there has been a total of 40 grant recipients who have benefited from this scheme with a total funding commitment of \$2 million. We expect this number to further increase with the new allocations received under this budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the scope assistance provided by this scheme varies according to the needs of the communities. This initiative is strategically aligned to government's commitment of empowering rural and maritime communities, bridging modern issues from connectivity to renewable energy, promotion of safe and accessible for women, children, elderly and the vulnerable in our communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the scheme continues to invest in our grassroots development. It is already changing the lives across the country. This symbolises our belief that development must be people-centred; empowering individuals through education and access and built on the partnerships and of course, not handouts. It is about meeting communities whether investing in their future and laying down the bridges to carry our people forward.

This budget reflects the Coalition Government's ongoing commitment to delivering resources that uplift our communities. It also calls on our people to be active partners in their own development. That is why we continue to champion the one-third contribution from the communities. This is not a burden, but as a pathway to partnership, ownership and dignity. This approach moves us beyond dependency, empowering communities to invest, protect and sustain the progress that they help build. In doing so, they become not just the recipients of development but also the custodians of it helping to shape a future that is truly their own.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we remain steadfast in our commitment to ensuring that no community is left behind, especially when it comes to basic needs of accessibility. Access is more than just physical connection, it is the gateway of opportunity, equality and progress. Through this budget, we will continue

working with our rural and remote communities to improve essential infrastructure such as roads, footpaths, bridges, crossings and the vital links to be able to access to schools, healthcare centres and public services. These investments are not only lifting standards of living, they are also about restoring a dignity, enhancing resilience and unlocking the full potential of every Fijian wherever they live.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition, the Government continues to accord high priority to the welfare of the Melanesians. We will continue to work through the Melanesian Settlements Task Force. This working group is tasked with looking into the formalisation of Melanesian settlements in Fiji. In early May this year, more than 400 people from 26 communities across Vanua Levu and Taveuni gathered at Nabunikadamu Village in Wainunu, Bua to share their stories of resilience and plans, marking the first ever gathering of Fijians of Melanesian descents in Vanua Levu.

The office will continue to review and finalise the Banaban and Rotuman Acts in consultation with the Council of Rotuma, Kioa and Rabi Council of Leaders, to ensure that their perspectives and realities are considered in these reforms through a comprehensive consultation process. The priority areas of this review include good governance, economic stability and security among others.

Termites, the Government remains steadfast in its support for households impacted by termite infestations. Over the past two years we have dedicated more than \$5 million in efforts to address the termite crisis. I am pleased to report that the Pilot National Baiting Programme has achieved notable progress with over 700 properties treated in high-risk areas within the Western Division.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the use of eco-friendly bait stations has proven to be effective in reducing termite populations without harming surrounding ecosystems. In addition, we have extended target subsidy assistance to around 800 vulnerable households, supporting the repair and construction of their homes that were extensively damaged by termites. We have provided \$5,000 subsidy to households spending under \$30,000 and a \$2,000 subsidy to those with incomes between \$30,000 and \$50,000.

Termites do not take holidays and neither do we. Termite control continues to be a top priority for this Government as nothing was done before. We have determined that prioritizing investment in the Termite Baiting Programme presents a more lasting solution than depending solely on subsidy assistance. Thus, in the coming year, Mr. Speaker, we are allocating \$2.9 million to continue with expansion of termite-baiting efforts.

The Government will also continue its strong partnership with the Biosecurity Authority of Fiji (BAF) to manage the spread of termites and support affected communities. An additional \$800,000 has been allocated to BAF to enhance public awareness, strength and early detection and surveillance and support research with International Biosecurity Agencies. Also, for individuals reconstructing their homes, they are eligible to claim back VAT on the items that are purchased for home construction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to respond to some of the superfluous comments from the other side of the House. Honourable Hem Chand has been talking about the increasing dropouts in schools. For far too long, the governments have overlooked the need to review our education system and to become relevant in the modern world. The Opposition has highlighted that there are issues to be addressed in our schools and the number of dropouts and the need for more funding to our schools. I only wish this was done during their time. Our exam-oriented education system is outdated and needs to be reviewed to meet the needs of the current labour market so that our students are recognized for their abilities.

I must congratulate the honourable Minister for Education and his team for the successful Review of the Education Act. Nearly every second week, the Office of the Prime Minister receives assistance applications from schools across Fiji – our schools need an upgrade and outdated dictatorial rule of keeping school management from conducting their own fundraising which has drastically affected the

ability to access much-needed funding to upkeep and renovate schools. The previous government simply implemented the policies of parents and guardians by weakening the bodies such as PTA and school management. The fact is that they were simply trying to broaden their wingspan of control by being the sole provider of funds in schools - a policy which is simply unsustainable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Members of the Opposition, particularly honourable Hem Chand mentioned that he had walked the length and breadth of the country to solicit the views on the Budget. It is quite interesting. He mentioned that the people that he had met were not happy with the Budget. I also spoke to a wide range of stakeholders, and I wish not air their views on the Budget. There is a Mr. Rajesh Sharma from Three Miles, “a very good Budget.” Sudashna, a tailor from Sabeto, who told me, “We have a very good government and the Budget is excellent.” Kamlesh Prasad from Sabeto said “I am operating a small catering business. This Budget is really good, it helps our people.” Pranita Devi from Sabeto said, “I run a small farming business. The support and excellent Budget from our Government is indeed very helpful in helping us sustain our micro-business.”

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. S. TUBUNA.- You never met them. You were not there. You went there and you were told to go away.

(Laughter)

“I run a small farming business. The support and excellent Budget from our Government is indeed very helpful in helping us sustain our micro-business.” These are facts, Mr. Speaker, Sir, not from social media. That is what I want the honourable Members to say. Pravin Goundar, Field 4, Lovu, Lautoka – “Excellent Budget. This Government cares about the poor.” Sudeshna of Masimasi, Sabeto – “Good budget and poor-friendly.”

These are some of the voices that the honourable Opposition Members who are trying not to solicit, but no one has ever come up with the real people that we are trying not to target in this Budget. These are the people that the Budget is trying to assist and these are facts, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Beg your pardon?

(Laughter)

HON. S. TUBUNA.- These are just some of the snippets from the people on the ground and they are the ones that this Budget will benefit.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2025-2026 Budget is a vote of confidence by our own people. I commend the 2025-26 Budget to this honourable House.

MR. SPEAKER.- Must I add to that, my taxi driver has certain views on the budget too but I will not share it with you.

(Laughter)

HON. A.N. TUICOLO.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, fellow citizens in the gallery, and those joining us from the comforts of their homes via live streaming. *Vina na*

cola and a very good evening to you all.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to contribute briefly on the 2025-2026 Appropriation Bill 2025 that is before the House. Before I go any further, I would like to congratulate and welcome *lavo*, the honourable Inosi Kuridrani back to Parliament. I pray that God will bless him as he continues to serve our nation.

Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the *vanua* of *Noikoro*, *kea werelevu i Lomaiviti*, please allow me to congratulate the newly installed paramount chief of Lau, *Na Turaga Bale na Tui Nayau, na Tui Lau, Sau ni Vanua o Lau*, Ratu Tevita Lutunauga Kapaiwai Uluilakeba Mara. *Vinaka vakalevu* Ratu for accepting the call to serve your people and the *vanua* and it is our prayer that God will bless and guide you in your leadership role.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I too would like to congratulate our Fijian athletes who recently participated in the Pacific Mini Games in Palau for their outstanding achievements. We fielded a vibrant and energetic team with majority of athletes who were youths. Team Fiji finished second with 27 Gold, 30 Silver and 24 Bronze medals. Our very own Heleina Young was named the overall outstanding female athlete, winning three Gold and two silver medals in athletics.

Our performance at the Mini Pacific Games was a major improvement from the seventh-place finish at the 2022 Saipan Games in Northern Marianas, where the squad collected nine Gold, 17 Silver and 17 Bronze. I pray that the Government continues to support our athletes and their preparations towards the upcoming Pacific Games that will be held in Tahiti in the year 2027. Comparing our achievements to others can be detrimental to the nation's growth. Instead of striving to match others, we must focus on our own progress and celebrate our unique journey.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset, I wish to thank the honourable Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, the Permanent Secretary for Finance and his hardworking team for the compilation of the 2025-2026 Budget. With the announcement of the 2025-2026 National Budget, the Coalition Government is not only providing its financial plan, outlining the estimated revenues and expenditures for the period, it is also focused on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through various initiatives introduced during the Budget announcement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Goal 1 of the SDGs is no poverty which aims to eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere by 2030. This includes ensuring that all individuals, especially the poorest and the most vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, basic services and ownership and control over land and other forms of property. I commend the Coalition Government in its effort in working towards this goal by introducing social protection initiatives that will address the cost of living challenges faced by individuals and households.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with a 5 percent increase in the social welfare recipients and government pensions monthly allowance, this increase will provide some relief to recipients and enable them to cope with the rising cost of living.

With a 3 percent rise in all civil servants' salary, the rise will stimulate economic activity and improve the financial well-being of civil servants. It will also enhance service delivery and increase efficiency within the public sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst our bus fare is reduced by 10 percent, the State of New South Wales, as recently published online news, is experiencing an increase in the cost of daily commute due to the rise of the annual Consumer Price Index (CPI). Despite the challenges we both face with neighbouring countries with a rising CPI, we commend the Coalition Government for the 10 percent reduction in bus fares as it will make bus travel more affordable for our citizens. For families struggling with the cost of

living, the Free Bus Fare Initiative will continue to alleviate a significant expense, freeing up resources for other essential needs.

The continuation of the \$200 Back-to-School Assistance is welcomed. This initiative will continue to assist eligible families to purchase essentials like uniforms, school bags, shoes and stationery for their children and prepare them for a new academic year. It is our prayer that parents and guardians will put this assistance to good use and its intended purpose.

Cyclones, droughts and changing weather patterns negatively impact crop yields, damage infrastructure and disrupt economic activity. Most of our farmers are affected by these natural disasters and are not able to save enough money for lease renewals. We commend the Coalition Government for introducing this new initiative to our farmers.

Further on, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we commend the Coalition Government for the reinstatement of the FNPF pension payment for those pensioners affected by the 2012 pension reforms, provision for free water, free medicines and 50 percent electricity subsidy, the reduction of VAT rate from 15 percent to 12.5 percent and the continuation of zero-rated VAT on 22 essential items.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, access to clean, safe water is a fundamental human right. We commend the Coalition Government for allocating \$284.4 million to the Water Authority of Fiji and outlining its plan to fix the aged water infrastructure, including upgrading of water sources and treatment plants, reticulation and distribution and non-revenue water reduction. I would also like to thank the Water Authority of Fiji for the work they do. Despite the amount of complaints laid against them, they continue to do their best in supplying water to the general public. With appropriate funding, WAF would be able to improve their service delivery and continue with the upgrade of water sources in both urban and rural communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to acknowledge the contribution of donor agencies, in particular the Asian Development Bank, for their continuous support in various infrastructure development from previous years to the present. The ADB has been actively involved in water projects in Fiji, particularly in the greater Suva area, to improve water supply and wastewater management, and for that we are grateful for their ongoing assistance.

We also welcome the continuation of the provision of free water to households with income of \$30,000 and below and providing electricity subsidies to 60,000 low-income families and 1,039 schools across the country. Most of these low-income families are often struggling to meet basic living expenses, and such assistance is greatly appreciated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increase in the budgetary allocation for the Ministry of Health and Medical Services by \$13 million is welcomed. In general, health budgets tend to increase annually, and with the increase in the budgetary allocation, it will address the challenges our healthcare system faces, like shortages of health workers and infrastructure limitations, particularly in rural areas. It will improve the quality of health services across all Divisions and advance universal healthcare, and will fund health prevention and control programmes, medical outreach initiatives, community engagement efforts, and partnerships with non-government organisations.

The budgetary allocation will also support the Ministry's initiatives, including the enhancement of existing facilities and the construction of new mortuaries. The rise in the number of people seeking medical assistance daily, does affect our healthcare system. We, as a nation, do not have any control over the number of people who fall sick, but as responsible citizens, we can control these statistics by taking charge of our health.

Our health is our wealth. I urge all the honourable Members in this august House to take the leading role in promoting healthy living. We must advocate for a balanced lifestyle that encompasses physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. One of the simple yet effective approaches in building a strong immune system and overall well-being at no cost, is the NEWSTART health concept. This acronym outlines eight key lifestyle factors that contribute to better health – Nutrition, Exercise, Water, Sunlight, Temperance, Air, Rest, and Trust in God.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this holistic health concept has gained recognition for its impact on immunity, longevity and disease prevention. Often we hear fellow Fijians expressing concerns about the state of the public healthcare system, citing issues such as long wait times, inadequate infrastructure, staff shortages, and lack of accountability. With adequate funding, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services will be able to rectify these problems and improve its service delivery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a damaged car can be repaired or replaced relatively quickly, potentially even the next day, while a damaged body cannot. It requires time and effort to heal, and some health problems can be permanent or require long-term management.

With \$7 million allocated to municipal master planning and new town development in Nabouwalu and Keiyasi, I thank the Coalition Government for the progress of Phase 1 of the project in Keiyasi, which is focussing on essential civil works and is expected to be completed by October this year. The new town development programme will promote economic activity and growth in the *vanua* of Navosa, and will capitalise on agribusiness and tourism opportunities, leveraging the area's potential in these sectors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the implementation of Phase 2 and Phase 3 of the project, it will no doubt attract job opportunities and stimulate economic activity in the upper valley and surrounding areas. The development is seen as a significant commercial venture that will benefit the local community.

Speaking of the Keiyasi Satellite Town, I too would like to acknowledge and pay tribute to the late Minister for Agriculture and Waterways, honourable Vatimi Tidara Tuinasakea Kaunitawake Rayalu.

Honourable Rayalu believed and had much respect for our farmers, especially the Navosa farmers. He speaks highly of them and realizes the potential our farmers have. He and his Ministry were focusing on revitalising the beef industry, especially in the Western Division and he continues to encourage the farmers to pursue this venture. According to honourable Rayalu, and I quote, “There is a huge demand for quality meat in our local hotel industry and it is a potential market that could provide consistent income for the villages beef production.”

He further added that hotels, resorts, and restaurants often look for high-quality, locally sourced beef, which could be a key salient point for the villages as we introduce improve cattle breeds. By aligning our farmers efforts with this demand, it can position themselves as reliable suppliers to the hospitality sector, potentially creating long-term business relationships. *Vinaka vakalevu* honourable Rayalu for the work you have done for our nation. I hope and pray that your dreams will be materialized by your successor in the not too distant future.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge every Fijian to take advantage of all initiatives introduced by this Budget and access various government grants and assistance programmes, including those for first home ownership, social welfare, and support for farmers and small businesses that are available in various government ministries. These initiatives aim to improve livelihoods, foster economic growth, and provide social safety nets. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion before the House.

MR. SPEAKER.-Honourable Members, the last batsman today is the honourable Leader of the Government in the Parliament, the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport. I do not know if Ratu has ever played cricket from which the phrase batting lineup originates, but it is common knowledge that the last batsman is not no batsman at all, but usually the lead fast bowler of the team and he leads the attack against the opposing side. So, I suppose in some ways, it is a correct summation of the honourable Member's overall role to his side.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for those enlightening comments.

The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, Members of Parliament and fellow Fijians; firstly, let me pay tribute to the late honourable Vatimi Rayalu for his services and commitment to the agriculture sector and farmers in Fiji. He was a man of strong words, but those words were to drive and enhance government services to our farmers and agriculture sector. *Moce toka mada* honourable Rayalu and may he rest in peace. I acknowledge Mrs. Rayalu and his children in prayers today.

I also take this opportunity to congratulate Ratu Tevita Uluilakeba Mara for his installation as *Tui Nayau and Tui Lau, Sau ni Vanua o Lau*. I thank the people of Lau for fulfilling their duties and also acknowledge all ministries and staff who had assisted in the preparation, especially in roads, water, energy and government shipping services.

Finally, congratulations to honourable Inosi Kuridrani for his return to Parliament. I wish him well and thank him for his services to LTA as LTA Chairman.

I rise to join my fellow Parliamentarians in providing my response to the Budget Address delivered on Friday, 27th June, 2025. At the outset, I wish to commend the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics and Ministry staff for their tireless effort in compiling this well-articulated and pragmatic Budget. A well-presented Budget is a culmination of the effort put in throughout the budget process from nationwide public consultation, private and public sector consultation, fine tuning works right to the presentation day. So, with the theme, "*Building, Security, Stability and Prosperity*", I do agree with this Budget. It is a practical and deeply measured national response with extraordinary global environment and circumstances in which we found ourselves in. Apart from this global challenges, there are pressing domestic issues that the Budget have directly addressed to ensure that we protect and sustain our people and our national economy.

In terms of the review of the Ministry's 2024-2025 budget performance, I am of the belief that in order to be effective in our tomorrow, it is imperative that we understand our current situation. In this regard, last week, we convened a two-day Ministry's Planning Workshop attended by senior officials from the eight departments, our Divisional teams together with representations from our four Commercial Statutory Authorities namely Fiji Roads Authority, Water Authority of Fiji, Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji and Land Transport Authority.

The primary objective of the workshop was to:

- (1) Conduct a comprehensive Review of the Ministry's 2024-2025 Budget performance including both operational and capital expenditures; and
- (2) Identify key challenges and propose remedial measures to improve budget execution for 2025-2026.

In this workshop, I have been advised that the Ministry's overall budget utilization under Head 40 for 2024-2025 Financial Year stands at 93 percent with \$665 million expended from a total allocation of \$721 million. The 7 percent unutilized balance amounts to \$51 million. Out of these, \$30 million are with the Statutory Authorities especially with WAF and FRA which are rolled-over for ongoing projects and commitments. The balance includes works by the PWD and other Departments for other Ministries and charged to those Ministries. The ongoing PWD reform will resolve this moving forward.

There are several significant achievements in the infrastructure sector during the 2024-2025 Financial Year made possible through the effective utilization of the \$665 million from the Ministry's allocated budget. These achievements reflect our commitment to improving the quality of life for all Fijians and supporting investment development through resilient and inclusive infrastructure.

In road works, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had conducted 18 AC Overlay and Road Seal Renewal Projects:

- Eight sites from the Central Division; Rewa Street, Laucala Bay Road, Ratu Dovi Road, Khalsa Road, Princess Road, Sawani-Serea, Kalabu Tax Free Zone, Nausori CBD, Wainibokasi and Draubuta;
- Four sites from the Western Division: Main Street Nadi Town, Rakiraki - Dama 25 sites, Nadi Bay Road, Wailoaloa, Balawa Street, Lautoka;
- Two sites from the Northern Division; Labasa Town Main Street, Savusavu Town Main Street; and
- One site from the Eastern Division; Levuka Town Main Street,

Mr. Speaker, 14 Emergency Restoration Works which includes:

- Nine sites in Central/Eastern - Gau, Koro, Cicia, Moala, Vanuabalavu, Lomaloma Jetty, Rotuma, King's Road, Nabulini, Dama Slip, Queen's Road and Maui Bay; and
- Five sites in the North - Wainikoro, Vunivutu, Nayarabale, Buca Bay and Napuka.

In terms of 25 Village/School Frontage Sealing and Seal Extension:

- Central Division - 9
- North Division - 14
- Western Division - 2

Further, FRA continues to strive for bigger developments such as:

- Funding and Procurement of Contractor and Consultant Supervision for the construction of four critical bridges, (Lami, Medrukutu, Viseisei and Sabeto) part of the Critical Bridge Resilience Projects secured with ADB and World Bank;
- Completion and opening of the Naseyani Bridge in the province of Ra;
- Upgrade of Suva Bus Stand including overlay works;
- Enabling works Korolevu and Vunikura Jetty;
- Commencement of the construction of the \$70 million Tamavua-i-wai Bridge funded through a grant from the Japanese government;
- Execution of contracts for emergency works; and
- Vunisea-Vacalea Access Road Project in Kadavu will also be commissioned soon.

In terms of access to clean and reliable water, fundamental to public health and agricultural productivity, the Ministry recognizes the water infrastructure is not merely utility, it is a strategic asset

that underpins national development:

- Completion of defects notification period, these were some of the major developments for the Rewa River Water Supply Scheme;
- Reticulation projects and watermain, 24 kilometres;
- Waila Offtake Pipeline - 1.5 kilometres;
- Lelean Offtake Pipeline – 800 metres;
- Nailega to Veinuqa Pipelaying works;
- Nadrala, Waibogi and Vusama Extensions as already mentioned;
- Rotuma Gensets and Upgrade Works;
- Waikete Watermain Upgrade;
- Balevuto Packaged Plant Treatment;
- Tagitagi Watermain Upgrade;
- Navo and Nasau Watermain Upgrade;
- Malake Submarine Cables;
- Nabouwalu Packaged Water Treatment;
- Plant Automation works; and
- 46 Gensets related works.

The energy sector is a crucial pillar within the Ministry of Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport, serving as a foundational enabler for national development, economic growth and social well-being. Works completed include:

- 918 households having access to EFL Grid Power;
- 900 Solar Home Systems;
- Generator Schemes – 93 villages;
- Lakaro Rural Government Stations- this has been progressed for rehabilitation and works to commence soon; and
- Continue works for replacement of Muana Hydro Turbine.

Sir, the Public Works Department issue has been raised. We consider this as a cornerstone of the Ministry, playing a vital role in the planning, development and maintenance of essential public infrastructure across the country. Below are some of the key deliverables:

- The Ministry, through the Department of Building and Architects, was able to produce 65 designs and related projects with a total value of \$38 million across various ministries and departments.
- Divisional Offices were able to complete more than 20 major building repairs and maintenance services, more than 10 new roads, maintenance works and foot crossings in process in Bua Lomanikoro.
- Major road upgrades have been done in Vanuabalavu, Moala, Matuku. In Naitasiri, the new road to Nakida is in progress, and in Ra, Naiserelagi, Nalidi and Nukulau Roma Road and crossings are in progress.
- In Vanua Levu, PWD continues to progress with Naselevu Road, Lea Road, Wailevu and Kubulau. After receiving a positive response, I have formally requested the Korean Government for initial technical and feasibility assessment to connect all interior Viti Levu roads to link up Navosa, Naitasiri, Ra, Wainibuka Highlands with modern roads and bridges. This is the vision that will be pursued with commitment. Despite the negative attitudes of honourable Premila Kumar and honourable Vijay Nath towards PWD, it is forging ahead to alleviate the 16 years of neglect in our rural population.

Sir, the Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport in the 2025-2026 Budget have been allocated a total of \$800 million for the year, which is an increase of \$79 million or 11 percent. It comprises \$237 million for operating expenditure and \$539 million for capital expenditure. For ministry departments (excluding CSAs), the total budget is \$78 million which includes \$56 million for operational and \$26 million for capital expenditure.

In terms of national infrastructure development, in terms of road, the allocated budget of \$387 million to FRA is well received by the Ministry. The proposed budget comprises of an operating budget of \$16.2 million and capital budget of \$371 million. Currently, the road infrastructure comprises 6,375 kilometres of roads, 1,388 bridges and crossings, 32 jetties, 1,325 kilometres of other institutional and public roads. Maintaining this is crucial for safety, cost-effectiveness and economic development. Therefore, the allocation of \$120 million for comprehensive maintenance is crucial. This programme comprises routine and periodic activities such as Rip & Remake, Reseals, Unsealed Road Re-Surfacing and Rehabilitation. as well as traffic light and street light renewals. These initiatives aim to preserve assets including sealed and unsealed roads, drainage systems, footpaths, bridges, jetties, depot renovations and streetlights across the four divisions.

Sir, we need to renew existing crossings and construct new ones as already raised by the Opposition. I am thankful that \$8.2 million has been allocated for renewal and construction of crossings across the divisions. These are essential for transportation safety, accessibility and, of course, economic development.

Sir, the increasing volume of traffic navigating Fiji's roads have accelerated wear and tear, leading to restrictions on numerous bridges. To this end, I would like to acknowledge the approval for the replacement of four critical bridges and related works and consultations. The project has been allocated US\$200 million, FJ\$400 million with concessional loan and grant financing to the Asian Development Bank and World Bank. This includes the replacement of Lami Bridge, Suvavou, Medraukutu bridge near Lami Cement Factory, Sabeto, Viseisei Bridge linking Nadi and Lautoka.

This project is a strategic effort to strengthen Fiji's transportation infrastructure and improve connectivity. I should add that on the Vanua Levu/China \$300 million road project, the technical team from the People's Republic of China will be travelling to Fiji within these two months and work with the team at FRA and PWD. This project compiles sealing of 82-kilometre roads with bridges and crossings modernised and the groundbreaking is expected at the end of the year or early 2026.

Water infrastructure, of course, is important. Water is crucial for public health, economic stability. Reliable water infrastructure ensures access for our populations and also for health. WAF has been granted a total of \$284.4 million with \$132.7 million as operating grant and \$151.7 million as capital grant.

Let me highlight the water programme and our capital projects for the new financial year. A total of \$83.4 million has been allocated to ensure the continued development and upgrading of water sources and treatment plants. This includes the upgrading existing undersized water distribution pipes, which currently lead to low water pressure in high demand areas, as well as replace ageing pipes that frequently burst that lead to increased maintenance costs.

Notable among these projects is the elevated Princess Road Project which has been allocated \$7.3 million and expected to benefit 14,000 citizens. The scope of works includes the laying of 11.7 kilometres of water pipeline from Sawani to Colo-i-Suva to Khalsa junction. A new pump station and construction of two 5-megalitre reservoirs. This project will ensure that the elevated areas such as Sakoca, Tacirua Dokanaisuva, Colo-i-Suva that faces continuous intermittent water supply will be able to receive 24/7 reliable water. It will allow operational flexibility and be able to improve water supply along the Princess

Road.

The water programme also includes the construction of a new 20-megalitre Packaged Water Treatment Plant, a complementary plant to the existing Tamavua Water Treatment Plant with a budget of \$4.3 million. This initiative will benefit the population of Suva around 230,000, Suva to Lami corridor and parts of Nasinu. It will enhance treatment capacity, allow for efficient water production and support future expansion to meet increasing water demand in these densely populated areas.

In addition, works have begun for the development of a new Packaged Water Treatment Plant in Navua, as well as a new water supply scheme in the Navua area to cover areas from Naboro to Nabukavesi and Namelimeli in Navua.

The extension of water supply services from Veinuqa to Kasavu in Tailevu as well as Naqali to Lomaivuna is also being looked into.

In the Western Division, the budget allocates \$2.5 million for water mains upgrading. Those living along the Vuda, Wairabetia, Nadi Airport, Nadi Back Road and Sabeto areas, focussing on improved and consistent water supply.

A further \$1.5 million has been set aside for water extensions to previously unserved communities, such as those in Korovuto, Coral Coast region and Votua in Sigatoka, benefit estimating 3,000 Fijians. Water supply improvement works have been allocated as well to improve water supply services with proposed works for Qalau and Nasivi intakes Tavua and rehabilitation works for Nadrou and Varaciva pump stations in Ba.

The Northern Division, of course, has not been forgotten. A total of \$5.6 million has been allocated to upgrade the Benau Water Treatment Plant. In addition, for non-revenue water, a budget has been allocated for \$5.3 million dedicated towards the performance-based contract targeted at reducing leakages.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for Residential Water Tank Programme, eligible households - 130 households will be supported with \$0.78 million in terms of the Water Tank Project.

Wastewater infrastructure remains a critical area. An allocation of \$15.1 million has been allocated. Notable projects include the upgrading of the Kinoya Wastewater Treatment Plant and, of course, the Water Treatment Plant in Pacific Harbour.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the infrastructure systems are vital, the treatment plants are important and must be run efficiently. We have allocated in terms of for salaries \$38 million and there is currently a Job Evaluation Exercise (JEE). We note the workforce turnover issue for technical areas continues to be an issue, especially for our Ministry in the various areas. This is an area which we need to look at in terms of staff retention.

For FRA, there are various works programmes with an allocation of \$31.7 million under the Capital Access Programme, transforming rural connectivity. Programme will focus on key areas:

- Western Division - approximately 28.6 kilometres will be upgraded;
- Central Division - areas such as the Rewa Delta, Tailevu South;
- Eastern Division, approximately 8.5 kilometres, Yawa Stage 2; and
- Northern Division - 45 kilometres of roads.

On road improvements, the budget allocates \$3 million, in addition to road improvements to the Vunikura Jetty, a vital infrastructure in terms of our jetties infrastructure.

On Public Works Department, a total of \$4.5 million has been allocated for maintenance and upgrades of rural roads.

In addition, Sir, in terms rural energy, which is also an important area, the Department of Energy has been allocated \$8.8 million in terms of solar home systems and also for the maintenance programme to upgrade and this has been an ongoing issue in terms of our rural population.

The other important development, as you may have heard from the announcement is the Infrastructure Resource Owners Development Fund. For the first time ever, the Ministry had proposed and secured a significant budget for the establishment of the Resource Owners Development Fund, to ensure that landowners whose land has been used for national infrastructure projects, receive a fair and equitable share of benefits derived from such developments. This will include:

- (1) Fulfilment of current legal obligations, such as water catchment forest compensation,
- (2) Upgrades of road and infrastructure within these landowning units,
- (3) Improving the access to energy and;
- (4) Upgrading, for example, their community hall.

The Fund will be administered by the Ministry in collaboration with relevant agencies, including the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Ministry of Land and Mineral Resources and Rural and Maritime Development. Close consultation will be held with various stakeholders.

In addition, for maritime travellers, there have been a lot of complaints in terms of the cost of freight. I am pleased to announce that the freight subsidy for community housing materials, including those who are building houses in the village or community halls funded by the villages will be assisted with \$300,000, that will assist maritime dwellers that wish to cart housing materials to the islands. This will support the implementation of Government's policy to improve access to construction materials in remote maritime communities and of course, in the improvement of their livelihoods.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I finish, I would like to highlight the climate resilience infrastructure financing element of the Ministry. To-date, the global environment facilities has approved a concept note submission of \$3 million grant under its special small climate finance for repair of flood gates and weirs in the Tailevu South and Rewa areas. This will also help, the WAF will install an innovative Coanda Technology Screen at Savura Dam which shall control the facilitation intrusion and greatly improve the current turbidity situation. This will vastly improve drinking water quality to thousands of consumers in the Suva Peninsula and will be in addition to the two major projects which I have mentioned to once and for all solve the Suva-Lami water woes. A legacy of 16 years of FijiFirst rule! The elevated Princess Road Water Infrastructure Project and the Tamavua Water Supplementary Treatment Plant are the two projects in addition to those ones and ground breaking will be done soon.

HON. V. NATH.- That is nothing new! That is what you said in the last budget.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- In conclusion, I commend the men and women of the Ministry of Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport, including WAF, FRA, LTA and MSAF for continuing to put in the hard yards for all Fijians, day and night, sunshine and rain, year-in year-out, despite the challenges. I congratulate them for winning the Civil Service 2025 Customer Service Excellence Award for above and beyond efforts in the work done throughout the year. I thank the Ministry of Finance and staff, for a well-prepared Budget to be commended not opposed. I commend and support the Budget.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that was the last of our speakers tonight and I thank you all for today. We will continue with the Batting Order tomorrow morning and that brings to an end today's sitting. Parliament now stands adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 7.40 p.m.

APPENDIX 2**Continuation of the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry's response to the Budget Address (Ref. Page 1164)**

Mr. Speaker, let me now address on the budgetary allocations to the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government is firmly committed to an inclusive approach that recognizes, respects and celebrates the rich diversity of Fiji's population. It was with this vision in mind that we re-established the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs - an institution regrettably dismantled by the previous government in 2011.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to pay tribute to our honourable Prime Minister for his visionary leadership in entrusting me and my Ministry with the responsibility of advancing the Coalition Government's mission of inclusivity through a social cohesion approach. I want to assure the honourable Prime Minister that we fully embrace this vision and remain steadfast in our commitment to turning it into reality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must commend the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics for allocating \$6.88 million to the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs. This is an increase of 27.5 percent compared to the current year's budget.

Mr. Speaker, in the 2025-2026 financial year, the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs will continue to build on the programmes successfully delivered last year. The Ministry will implement a wide range of initiatives focused on promoting inclusivity, national unity and the preservation of Fiji's rich cultural heritage. These will include grant assistance to religious and cultural organisations, capacity building programmes for communities, interfaith and multicultural engagement activities, educational support for minority groups, policy advocacy and efforts to safeguard traditional practices and identities.

For the 2025-2026 financial year, the Ministry has been allocated \$2 million for the Grants Programme. The increased sum of \$700,000 means that the Ministry will have more opportunities to serve our multiethnic communities through Community-Based Organisations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year, the Ministry hosted the Girmit Commemoration Event at Subrail Park in Labasa from 10th to 12th May. It was my promise to the people in the North to have this national event hosted there. I am grateful that I kept my promise.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am grateful that the Ministry has, once again, been allocated \$270,000 for the Girmit Commemoration Event in the 2025-2026 financial year. Having successfully hosted the event in Suva, Lautoka and Labasa in recent years, we now intend to shift from commemoration to revitalisation, focusing on creating lasting legacies and deeper engagement, particularly with our youth and wider society. In the coming financial year, we will introduce a range of new initiatives, including:

- (1) Nationwide Legacy Tree Planting
An initiative where trees will be planted at Girmit sites in Fiji to represent Girmit History, Girmitya families, supported by digital mapping and storytelling.
- (2) Girmitya Fellowship Programme
Grants to support researchers, writers, and artists exploring Girmit history and culture.
- (3) Girmit Institution Grant
Grants will be provided to the institutions built during the Girmit era, like schools and places of worship, to support their Girmit ties and contribution.
- (4) Youth Dialogue: "My Heritage, My Identity"
A panel discussion and debate series, encouraging young people to reflect on cultural identity and unity.

- (5) Commemorative Stamp Release
A special edition stamp in partnership with Post Fiji to honour the Girmitya legacy.
- (6) National Girit Day Debate or Moot Court
Youth-led platforms to explore historical and legal perspectives of the Girmitya experience.
- (7) 'Girit and Me' Social Media Challenge
A digital campaign encouraging youth to share personal or family stories related to the Girit legacy.
- (8) Women's Legacy Circle
A dedicated event to honour and share the untold stories of Girmitya women.
- (9) Commemorative Time Capsule
A symbolic initiative to collect and preserve letters and items reflecting Girit history to be opened 50 to 100 years from now.
- (10) 'Girmitya Recipes Through Time' Cookbook
A cultural publication featuring traditional recipes and family stories passed down through generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through these initiatives, we aim not only to remember but to meaningfully connect the past with the future, ensuring the Girmitya legacy continues to inspire generations to come.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, members of the public may have seen me, alongside my staff, conducting community consultations across the country. These grassroots engagements have been invaluable in understanding the real challenges our people face, as well as identifying opportunities where government support can make a meaningful difference. I am pleased to share that a sum of \$113,000 has been allocated in the upcoming financial year to continue these outreach efforts, ensuring that the voices of all communities are heard, respected and reflected in our policies and programmes.

In the 2025-2026 financial year, the Ministry will develop comprehensive Multi-Ethnic Directory to capture key data on the various ethnic groups across Fiji. This initiative will enable us to better understand the demographic composition and cultural backgrounds of communities in different regions. Ultimately, it will support the Ministry's broader Multi-Ethnic Community Mapping exercise, helping us to plan more targeted, inclusive and culturally sensitive programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to the initiatives already outlined, my Ministry will continue to fund the next phases of several ongoing capital projects, as well as initiate new ones during the 2025-2026 financial year. These include the:

- (1) Completion of Tuatua Crematorium building, including the installation of gas fired cremation chamber.
- (2) Procurement and Installation of Gas-Fired Crematorium Chambers
For the 2025-2026 financial year, a total of \$900,000 has been allocated for the procurement of gas-fired cremation chambers, which will be installed at designated cemeteries in Nausori, Lautoka, Ba, Sigatoka and Savusavu.
- (3) Construction of Sharad Ghaats in Labasa and Lautoka
These facilities will serve as important community spaces, with an allocation of \$450,000 to support their development.
- (4) Digitization of Girit Records
The Ministry will begin preliminary work to digitize and create a searchable database of more than 60,000 Girmitya immigration records. This initiative will enable descendants to reconnect with their heritage and preserve a critical part of Fiji's history.

- (5) Refurbishment of the Lautoka Girit Centre
To revitalize this important heritage site, the Ministry has allocated \$490,000 for structural and facility improvements.
- (6) Preparatory Work for a State-of-the-Art Girit Museum
A further \$112,500 has been allocated to support planning and preparatory work for the establishment of a world-class museum at the Lautoka Girit Centre. This museum will serve as a cultural and educational hub, preserving the Girit legacy while promoting cultural tourism. I have personally visited similar museums in Mauritius and believe Fiji has equal potential.
- (7) Bilateral Support
I am pleased to acknowledge the generous commitment by the Government of the Republic of India to fund the construction of the museum, once preparatory works are complete. I extend my sincere gratitude to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Government of India for their unwavering support towards initiatives that honour the Indian diaspora globally.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, the 2025-2026 Budget is bold, inclusive, and forward-looking. It strengthens resilience, drives investment and improves livelihoods. Most importantly, it reflects the voice and concerns of our people.

I fully support the motion. *Vinaka vakalevu, dhanyavaad*, and thank you.