

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

TUESDAY, 5TH AUGUST, 2025

[CORRECTED COPY]

CONTENTS

	<u>Pages</u>
Minutes	1490
Communications from the Speaker	1490-1491
(1) Welcome	
(2) Congratulatory Remarks – New Cabinet Ministers	
(3) Written Response	
(4) BSP Life (Fiji) Limited	
Ministerial Statements	1491-1511
(1) Update on High Level Visit to Australia – Hon. S.L. Rabuka	
(2) Air India Flight AI171 Tragedy and Fiji’s Aviation Preparedness - Hon. V.R. Gavoka	
(3) Fiji’s Peacekeeping Legacy and the Strategic Role of RFMF in International Operations – Hon. P. Tikoduadua	
(4) Forest Subsidy Programme in Fiji – Hon. A.V.B.C. Bainivalu	
Questions	1512-1532
<u>Oral Questions</u>	
(1) Targets for Reduction of Burglary and Drug-Related Offences (Q/No. 85/2025)	
(2) Passenger Safety at Sea (Q/No. 86/2025)	
(3) Upgrading Qualification of ECE Teachers (Q/No. 87/2025)	
(4) Legislative Review and Policy Framework (Q/No. 88/2025)	
(5) Relocation Programme – Savusavu Rubbish Dump (Q/No. 89/2025)	
(6) Standing Trees Compensation Policy (Q/No. 90/2025)	
(7) Update on Rent Freeze (Q/No. 91/2025)	
(8) Land Buy Back Scheme – 1989 and 1993 (Q/No. 92/2025)	
(9) Update – Review of the Dairy Industry (Q/No. 93/2025)	
(10) Code of Conduct – Public Service Vehicle Operators (Q/No. 94/2025)	
<u>Written Questions</u>	
(1) iTaukei Affairs GCC (Amendment) Regulations 2024 (Q/No. 95/2025)	
Suspension of Standing Orders	1525
Consolidated Review Report – Ministry of iTaukei Affairs 2017-2022 Annual Reports	1532-1538
Consolidated Review Report – FDB 2022 and 2023 Annual Reports	1538-1546
Consolidated Review Report – Audit of Provincial Councils Volume 4 to Volume 6	1546-1555

TUESDAY, 5TH AUGUST 2025

The Parliament met at 10.39 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Minister for Youth and Sports, honourable Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs and honourable Assistant Minister for Justice.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Monday, 4th August, 2025, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

A very good morning to you, honourable Members. It is a pleasure to welcome you to today's sitting as we come together in the service of our nation's progress. A warm welcome to those joining us from the public gallery and to everyone watching the live broadcast, whether you are tuned in via television or streaming online. Your keen interest in the democratic process brings life into our debates and decisions. Thank you for staying connected and engaged.

Congratulatory Remarks – New Cabinet Ministers

It would be remiss of me if I were not to, first of all, this morning congratulate honourable Lynda Tabuya and honourable Tomasi Tunabuna on your elevation to be Cabinet Ministers in the Coalition Government. Congratulations, and I can only wish you well in your new appointments.

Written Response

For the information of honourable Members, the Secretariat has received the written response from the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport to Written Question No. 71 of 2025 that was asked by honourable Jone Usamate. The response has been conveyed to honourable Usamate and a copy uploaded on the Parliament website.

BSP Life (Fiji) Limited

Honourable Members, please, be informed that insurance agents from BSP Life will be based in

the Library today to provide their services to all honourable Members. You are encouraged to see them and approach them to clarify any queries that you may have.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

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

- (1) Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Civil Service and Public Enterprises;
- (2) Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation;
- (3) Minister for Defence and Veterans Affairs;
- (4) Minister for Justice and Acting Attorney-General will deliver two Statements;
- (5) Minister of Fisheries and Forestry; and
- (6) Minister for Environment and Climate Change.

The Ministers may speak for 20 minutes and after the Minister, I will then invite the Leader of the Opposition or his designate to speak on the Statement for no more than five minutes. There will be no other debate.

Update on High Level Visit to Australia

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir and honourable Members, before I make my statement, I would like to dedicate this moment to remembering one of Fiji's long serving civil servants who left us a week ago. Mr. Parmesh Chand was a dedicated civil servant. He was humble, considerate and hardworking. His calm demeanour touched many lives. His sense of duty shone through in everything that he did in his final days. He faithfully carried out his duties to the fullest extent of his abilities.

Mr. Chand was one who we can all attest, was proud of his heritage and his nation; carrying our noble banner blue until the very end. We thank his family for the life that he lived for Fiji. We know that life ends, Mr. Speaker, but our responsibility to remember continues. Lest we forget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the week of 1st July to 7th July, 2025, I led a Government of Fiji Delegation on a high-level visit to Australia, after my visit in October 2023. I was accompanied by the Minister for Defence and Veteran Affairs, Minister for Immigration, Minister for Policing, the Permanent Secretary in the Office of the Prime Minister, Permanent Secretary for Civil Service and Public Enterprises, and the Deputy Commander of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces.

The Delegation was joined by Fiji's High Commissioner to Australia, Fiji High Commission Officials in Canberra and an official providing media coverage. The Fiji High Commission in Canberra provided local support and transportation, local costs and accommodation for the Prime Minister and delegation members during the official programme that was funded by the Australian Government.

On arrival in Canberra on 1st July, the Delegation was met by the Minister for Home Affairs and Arts, Cybersecurity, Immigration and Citizenship, the honourable Tony Burke. The Minister had meetings with us and discussed avenues to develop closer cooperation on combating crime, especially drugs, strengthening law enforcement, maritime domain security and border management.

A traditional 'Welcome to Country' was accorded to the Delegation by Ngunnawal Senior Elder, Ms. Violet Sheridan and representatives of her tribe, the traditional custodians of the land on which the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) stands. Also, in attendance at the ceremony was

Ms. Tara Cheyne, Member of the ACT Legislative Assembly (MLA) and Attorney-General of the ACT, who welcomed the Delegation to the capital.

We paid a courtesy call on Her Excellency, Miss Sam Mostyn, the Governor-General of Australia, at Australia Government House. The Governor-General acknowledged the enduring strength of the renewed elevation of the Vuvale Partnership, and welcomed Fiji's support to regional solidarity and collaboration. Our discussions spanned Australia and Fiji's close economic partnership, infrastructure development, security and sports cooperation. Her Excellency acknowledged the significant contributions of the Fijian community in Australia.

In life, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we do things and we help and, ; in some cases, we even save others. On many occasions, we do those to those people who may not know us and some, we do not even know and some, we will never meet again and probably do those things just because we feel that we were at the right place and at the right time to do some good to someone. Whatever it may be, we must remember the good people who had helped us in the past and stood with us in those precarious moments in our lives that may have defined the life we have had until our death.

I hosted a reunion dinner while I was in Canberra with my Indian Defence Services Staff College Alumni. We attended the Indian Staff College in 1979 and one of us was visiting Australia at the time, Colonel (Retired) Sarath Jayawardhana of Sri Lanka, and his wife. We were also joined by Mr. Stephen Sainsbury of Australia and his wife, Margaret Sainsbury. Our guests included His Excellency Andrew Needs, New Zealand High Commissioner to Australia, and Ms. Tiarn Brown, the eldest daughter of honourable Mark Brown, the Prime Minister of Cook Islands.

The dinner provided an opportunity to convey my appreciation to the Governments of Sri Lanka, New Zealand and the Cook Islands for the successful rescue mission undertaken in 1988, where a freighter with 89 Cook Island nationals was hijacked by pirates in the Indian Ocean. The harbour master in the Cook Islands at the time who was known to some of us, Enele Maafu, a former officer of the Fiji Navy, called me to ask for my assistance.

I did not know what to do. I was here and the hijacked pirate action was happening in the Indian Ocean. Anyway, I called Colombo and asked for Sarath. Sarath was willing to help, and we successfully rescued them in a joint operation between the Indian and Sri Lankan Navies. The pirates were captured and the hostages released, as well as their cargo. The hostages or the crewmen, were flown back to New Zealand by Sri Lanka, and flown by New Zealand to the Cook Islands. So, everything went well for them, and I met one of them during my last visit to the Cook Islands.

On 2nd July, the Delegation visited the Australian Border Force (ABF) Headquarters where we were received by the Commissioner of the Border Force, Mr. Gavin Reynolds, and his leadership team. Both sides recognised the increasing intensity and complexity of transnational organised crime through the maritime and air domains within the Pacific region. We discussed avenues to improve Fiji's border management system against emerging regional security challenges.

The ABF Leadership Team provided an overview of ABF's operations and measures of countering unlawful activities such as illegal, unregistered and unregulated (IUU) fishing within Australia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), and the application of policy frameworks, domestic legislations and international conventions when responding to illegal activities within Australia's maritime zones. In the process, we discussed measures and avenues of collaboration, as no one country can, alone, deal with the issues of transnational organised crime.

Fiji provided updates on Fiji's Maritime Essential Services Centre (MESC), National Security Strategy and the proposed Maritime Security Policy. Both sides recognised the importance of timely

exchange of information and agreed that in view of the overlapping interests of maritime security, stronger cooperation on border management and maritime security are needed.

The meeting also explored ways to elevate border management and technology solutions, sharing of information and best practices. Work is now underway between Fiji Immigration and their ABF counterpart on the Migration Enforcement and Response Intelligence Tool (MERIT). This work is linked to the Advanced Passenger Information System and the Passenger Name Record (PNR), also in the current work programme.

During the visit, Fiji's e-passport was commissioned and is now fully operational and compatible with the Australian Smart Gate System, enabling Fijian travellers to utilise automated border processing at major international airports in Australia.

The Delegation was given a tour around the ABF Watch Floor, a combined 24/7 multi-agency operation within the ABF, conducting real-time monitoring and surveillance of Australian borders. Agencies included those from friendly nations around the region.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, following the meeting, the ABF gave me the opportunity to address Australian media representatives and dignitaries at the National Press Club of Australia. In the address, I reaffirmed Fiji's foreign policy statements as presented in the Foreign Policy White Paper 2024, which sets out a 'family first' Pacific regionalism as its foundation.

In discussing the Ocean of Peace concept, I emphasised that Fiji's highest strategic priority was a stable Indo-Pacific region, and its most significant security threat lies in the prospect of a region driven by division, insecurity and instability. The Ocean of Peace is Fiji's contribution towards ensuring a peaceful and stable region in the midst of growing geopolitical tensions.

On the Fiji and Australia Vuvale Partnership, and in acknowledging the growing cooperation between our two countries, the emerging regional and global security situation, our relationship needs to step up.

My address at the National Press Club focussed specifically on the Pacific as the Ocean of Peace. In recognition of the scope and strategic goals of the Ocean of Peace with the maturing Vuvale Partnership, I proposed that it is time to consider enhancing the partnership with a security agreement or a treaty.

I acknowledge that my address and response to questions from the media at the National Press Club gained media traction within Australia and the wider Pacific region, particularly my confirmation that the Government of Fiji will not agree to the establishment of a foreign military base in Fiji.

On the afternoon of 2nd July, the Delegation paid its respects to the Australian War Memorial. During the solemn Last Post Ceremony at the Commemorative Courtyard, we laid wreaths by the Pool of Reflection in remembrance of soldiers that had served and lost their lives in the call of duty, honouring their sacrifice for the freedom we enjoy today.

In the evening, our High Commissioner hosted a welcoming reception at the Fiji High Commission in honour of our visit. In attendance were members of the Diplomatic Corp in Canberra, Officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and members of the Fijian community.

Following the cocktail reception, the Fijian community in Canberra hosted the Delegation to a dinner and a *talanoa* session. The interaction at the event was an opportunity to update the community in Canberra on the Government's development progress and plans. The event also provided an opportunity

for members of the diaspora to discuss issues directly with Ministers. The Ministers will later be giving their own ministerial statement in relation to that visit.

On 3rd July, the Delegation departed for Shoalwater Bay Training Area in Central Queensland, where 129 Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) personnel are currently engaged in a five-month military exercise under Exercise Talisman Sabre 2025. It is the largest combined military exercise by the Australian Defence Force (ADF) involving 30,000 military personnel from 19 nations. The visit to Shoalwater Bay underscored the depth of the security cooperation between the ADF and the RFMF.

The RFMF contingent is part of a rotational company pilot, the first of its kind with any Pacific Defence Force. The arrangement enables ADF and RFMF personnel to integrate, collaborate and build collective capability prior to conducting a series of combined exercises at Talisman Sabre 2025.

True comradeship was on full display as 129 RFMF personnel trained with their Australian counterparts. As part of the ongoing military cooperation between Fiji and Australia, the event included joint training exercises aimed at enhancing interoperability, sharing tactical knowledge, strengthening regional security ties, and learning from one another with mutual respect and shared purpose.

During the visit, the Fiji Delegation also observed firsthand a live demonstration of an offensive training phase. At the heart of the renewed and elevated Vuvale Partnership, this bond reflects our deep commitment to one another, standing together and moving forward as one family. The pilot will inform options for potential future cooperation models.

The visit was an opportunity to impress on the Fijian company on the importance of service, loyalty and professionalism. As a former soldier, I know what such visits does to the morale of those whom we visited. It reaffirmed the troops' dedication to serve. The visit to Shoalwater Bay concluded with singing and cheering from the troops.

On 4th July, the Delegation visited the Pinkenba Hub in Brisbane. The Pinkenba Hub is a facility that supports the Pacific Policing Initiative (PPI) and the Pacific Police Support Group by providing training and development opportunities, including secondment for police officers across the Pacific. The hub focuses on enhancing skills in policing leadership, management, administration and operational coordination.

The visit is in line with ongoing efforts to strengthen Fiji's policing capabilities. It was also an opportunity to gain an inside view of the intent and the content of the Memorandum of Understanding on the Solesolevaki Partnership and Police Cooperation that was signed by the Fiji Police Force and the Australian Federal Police.

We had a very comprehensive tour, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Unfortunately, we were subjected to watching a very well-played game that our national team put on against Australia. Unfortunately for us, they did not win. They did not lose, but they did not win. I felt that they did not lose the game. It made the Prime Minister relaxed. He was very, very tensed right throughout the meeting, knowing that our boys were capable of thrashing them. A week later, our boys were given the opportunity, and we were glad to see them win against Scotland. I congratulate them, even on their performance against Australia.

I thank my fellow honourable Ministers who went with me and the whole delegation. We gained a lot from that visit. I am sure our Fiji will benefit a lot when we put into action and operationalise a lot of things that were discussed during the visit. We bring greetings from the Prime Minister and his Cabinet, the Government, people, and the Governor-General of Australia. Thank you, Mr Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the honourable Prime Minister for his Statement. I now call on the

Leader of the Opposition or his designate for his response.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first, I would like to begin by thanking the honourable Prime Minister for the outline of what we can see has been a very fruitful visit to Australia, strengthening the Vuvale Partnership and also continuing on with our strong relationship with Australia in the past.

Our dealings as a country with Australia have had their ups and downs in the past, so over the past few years, it has been on a continual improvement mode and that is something that we are always very thankful for. I was listening to the honourable Prime Minister and I can see that he has become a very good diplomat in saying that we did not win, but we also did not lose. Obviously, there is a message there.

We are also very thankful to Australia, as part of the Vuvale Partnership, where they helped us to set up the Drua. I think the Drua has been one of the channels by which we have been able to really strengthen our rugby teams that we have in this country, giving them a pathway rather than exposing them overseas.

The other thing that I have noticed also in Australia over the past is when the honourable Prime Minister mentioned that they were greeted in the traditional manner in Australia. I went as a student to Australia many years ago. That was not something that you saw often. I am glad to see that there has also been a change in the evolution of understanding of things that are important to us.

I was very glad to hear of all the commitments that Australia has. I think their commitment of around A\$52 million that will help us in all the things that we really need in this country, in terms of strengthening our borders, border security, the assistance that they will give us in terms of the implementation of our National Security Strategy, trans-national crime and we have seen the risen in cases of how porous our borders are and listening to the honourable Prime Minister where he was saying that they are going to help strengthen our border security because this is one of the big issues, especially this last case that we have had in the country of around 4.5 tonnes of drugs coming into our country because of those porous borders. I understand that part of that package will also be helping to screen containers as they come into the country. All these assistance will be very welcomed to all of us in Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I also noticed that the honourable Prime Minister talked about the assistance that will be given in terms of transnational crime. As he rightly said, it is not something any country can do on its own. It needs a lot of cooperation amongst countries, especially for small countries like us. We have a large EEZ, very porous zones, we do not have the manpower, so they built it to be able to lean onto the system that they have in Australia that will help us in information sharing and in surveillance.

Australia has always been a good partner for us in the area of health. They have invested a lot in our health systems strengthening. A lot of countries have projects in specific issues, but Australia has been very strong in health systems strengthening. If I recall reading correctly or heard correctly, that part of their assistance will be to help us deal with one of the big scourges or problems that we have right now, which is HIV/AIDS. For HIV/AIDS in the Pacific, Papua New Guinea was always number one. We are now number one in the Pacific. It has really risen greatly, so this is something that we really need to grapple with very strongly, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The honourable Prime Minister also talked about the Ocean of Peace concept that he has been promoting and I am glad to hear the commitment that he has made, that the Government will not allow any foreign military base in our country. That is something, I think, we all endorse. The idea of Ocean of Peace is something that is important and I think we all welcome that. However, I think, the idea of the Ocean of Peace must not only be limited.

As we perpetuate this idea or this notion, we must take the notion of peace not only limited to the Pacific but all over the world. We now have major conflicts around the world - in Gaza and in Ukraine. I have spoken once in this Parliament about Government abstaining from a vote on a ceasefire in Gaza. I hope that we will take up this idea of national peace, we will take these measures not only for the Pacific Ocean, but to anywhere in the world where there is conflict.

With those words, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Air India Flight AI171 Tragedy and Fiji's Aviation Preparedness

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Before I proceed with my Ministerial Statement, I join the honourable Prime Minister in paying tribute to a true son of Fiji and the Pacific, Mr. George Fiji Veikoso. His sudden passing is a great loss to our nation and the region. George, born into the chiefly family of the *Tora Ni Bati* of Buretu in Tailevu, was a cultural ambassador, who proudly represented Fiji and the Pasifika on the global stage through his music. I had the honour of meeting him late last year as he planned his homecoming concert, a powerful celebration of our identity.

His 2024 homecoming concert was one of the largest musical events our nation has ever hosted. It attracted thousands of fans from across the Pacific, Australia, New Zealand, Samoa, Vanuatu and beyond, and played a pivotal role in helping Fiji achieve its tourism visitor arrival targets. The event was a national moment of pride and demonstrated our capacity to host worldclass gatherings. George, known as the 'King of Island Reggae,' leaves behind a lasting legacy.

On a personal note, I have known him since his youth and our families shared a special bond. I extend my heartfelt condolences to his loved ones, the *Vanua vua na Turaga na Tora ni Bati* and his countless friends. May his memory live on and may his music continue to inspire.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and all honourable Members of this august House; I wish to speak today on the disaster that occurred in India about two months ago.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, air travel binds our nation to the wider world. It connects families, drives commerce, and supports the vital exchange of people and ideas. The safety of our skies is not merely a technical concern, it is a matter of public trust and international cooperation. It is in this spirit that I rise today to reflect on a tragedy that occurred far from our shores yet resonates deeply with us all. I thank you for this opportunity to address this august House regarding the tragic crash of Air India Flight AI171 on 12th June this year.

We extend our deepest sympathies to all those affected and reaffirm this Coalition Government's unwavering commitment to aviation safety and to maintaining public confidence in the skies that connect our islands and our people to the world.

As Minister responsible for civil aviation, it is my solemn duty to assure the travelling public of Fiji that our skies remain safe - that the systems, protocols and vigilance entrusted to us are robust and continually improving, and that we are responding to global aviation incidents not with distance but with diligence, learning, adapting and implementing wherever necessary.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the morning of 12th June, 2025, Air India Flight AI171, a Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner, departed from Ahmedabad enroute to London Gatwick Airport. Barely 30 seconds after lift-off, the aircraft crashed into a college hostel nestled within a densely populated residential neighbourhood. The incident claimed the lives of 241 out of 242 people on board, and 19 individuals on the ground, amounting to 260 fatalities in total. Only one passenger survived. The world watched

in grief as India mourned, and as investigators began to unravel the chain of events that led to such a catastrophic loss.

Preliminary findings by India's Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB) indicated a deeply troubling anomaly, in that, both engine fuel switches moved from the 'run' to the 'cutoff' position within one second of each other shortly after take-off, causing dual engine power loss. The cockpit voice recorder revealed a moment of confusion. One pilot questioned the other about the fuel cut-off switches. The other denied initiating any such action. A Mayday call followed, but the aircraft could not regain power. Its fate, tragically, was sealed in moments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Indian aviation authorities acted with urgency and transparency. From 15th June, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) mandated enhanced technical inspections across all Air India 787-8 and 787-9 aircrafts. Particular attention is being paid to the fuel system, engine controls and the Full Authority Digital Engine Control (FADEC) system. Investigations are ongoing. No evidence of a mechanical fault has been detected. The focus remains squarely on the uncommanded activation of the engine full cut-off switches, whether by human error, procedural oversight, or otherwise.

India's AAIB is collaborating closely with Boeing - the manufacturer, GE Aerospace - the engine manufacturer, and the US National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), in accordance with the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Annex 13 protocols which covers investigations on aviation. Their transparency and commitment to international cooperation must be commended.

Mr. Speaker, what does this mean for Fiji? One might ask – why should a tragedy so far from our shores command the attention of our Parliament? The answer lies in the universal nature of aviation. The safety protocols of one nation have ripple effects on the global system. Every accident, no matter where it occurs, becomes a lesson and a warning to all others.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are reminded of the global implications of aviation failures by the tragic crashes of two Boeing 737 MAX 8 aircraft, the Lion Air Flight JT610 in Indonesia in 2018 and Ethiopian Airlines Flight ET302 in 2019. Both accidents, which claimed a combined 346 lives, were caused by a malfunction in the aircraft's MCAS system, which repeatedly forced the aircraft's nose down due to faulty sensor data, despite pilot attempts to regain control. MCAS is Manoeuvring Characteristics Augmentation System of the aircraft.

Those incidents led to the worldwide grounding of the B737 MAX fleet, and triggered sweeping changes in pilot training, system redesign and regulatory oversight. Like the recent Air India tragedy, they show how automation, when misunderstood or improperly managed, can have devastating consequences and that reminded us that trust in aviation is built not only on advanced technology but on transparency, training and decisive regulation.

In Fiji, our skies are our highways. Tourism is the lifeblood of our economy. Our regional connectivity, our ability to send children for further studies overseas, medical repatriation and trade, coupled with domestic and international travel, depends on the integrity of our air transport systems. We, therefore, cannot afford to be complacent. That is why the Coalition Government, through the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation and with the expert oversight of the Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji (CAAF), has taken immediate steps in light of these incidents. Following the preliminary findings of the investigation, CAAF initiated a targeted safety audit of all Fiji-registered aircraft with comparable systems to the Boeing 787.

We also have complex aircraft here, Mr. Speaker, Sir. These include Boeing 737 Max fleet, Airbus A330 and Airbus A350, all operating out of Fiji for our national airline. These audits focus on inspection and validation of:

- Engine fuel cut-off switch mechanisms;
- FADEC systems;
- Emergency engine shutdown and restart protocols; and
- the black box recording and data retrieval capabilities.

As a regulatory body, CAAF is aligning these audits with best practices and standards set out by ICAO and regional safety oversight groups. Where necessary, additional directives will be issued.

In parallel, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is taking proactive steps to review regulations governing the investigation of aviation accidents. This includes the development of independent, spontaneous, robust and effective investigation systems and processes that align fully with ICAO required standards and international best practices. These improvements are aimed at ensuring our systems are not only compliant, but capable of responding more quickly and effectively in the future.

Honourable Members, let me be clear, while Fiji has not recorded any incidents of that kind as in Ahmedabad, we will not wait for one to happen before acting.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, aviation safety is not just about hardware - it is equally about human factors. The Air India tragedy exposed a breakdown in cockpit coordination. The cockpit voice recordings reveal confusion, lack of awareness and a missed opportunity for corrective intervention.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, CAAF has intensified surveillance of operator training programmes with a renewed focus on Crew Resource Management, known as CRM. This involves:

- enhancing mutual awareness;
- improving challenge and response protocols during critical flight phases; and
- refreshing standard operating procedures during take-off, climb and emergency scenarios.

All licensed operators in Fiji have been instructed to submit updated CRM training plans for validation. Yes, honourable Members, pilot training is being enhanced and is being matched by regulatory scrutiny to ensure compliance and competence at all levels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me add that the Indian AAIB is expected to release its final report over the next couple of months. Fiji, through CAAF, is already positioning itself to assess and integrate any relevant findings and safety recommendations into our own aviation network.

We are also engaging with ICAO and our regional partners, particularly those in the Pacific Aviation Safety Office, to ensure alignment on any regulatory or procedural updates that may emerge from the investigation. This includes consideration of new or revised regulations should systemic vulnerabilities be confirmed. As a government, we are committed to continuous improvement. Every lesson learned elsewhere becomes a lesson applied at home.

Mr. Speaker, I am mindful of the anxieties that such a tragedy can evoke, particularly among our own people who rely on air travel. Let me offer a direct assurance to every Fijian passenger, every airline worker and every family member who sees a loved one off at the airport – the skies over Fiji remain safe.

We are safe because we, as a government, refuse to take chances. We are safe because the Coalition Government believes in accountability, vigilance and proactive regulation. They are safe because the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation, in close collaboration with CAAF, continues to hold Fiji aviation industry to the highest international standards. We do not wait for the storm, we

read the weather, prepare and protect.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, tragedy often brings clarity. The crash of Air India Flight AI171 is a reminder that aviation safety must never be taken for granted. It is a system built not only on technology but on trust, discipline and diligence. We also renew our resolve to act, to learn, and to safeguard the lives entrusted to our skies.

Let this Parliament be assured that under the leadership of the Coalition Government, Fiji's aviation safety standards will not only be upheld, but they will also be strengthened. We will remain alert, we will remain accountable, and above all, we will remain committed to the safety and wellbeing of every Fijian who looks to the skies, whether for business, for family or for hope. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I invite the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate, for their response, I must apologise for overlooking to also congratulate honourable Inosi Kuridrani for his appointment as Assistant Minister for Agriculture. Congratulations, honourable Kuridrani. Equally, I wish you well in your appointment.

I am also informed that honourable Kuridrani's son, the Fiji-born Wallaby rugby player, Tevita Kuridrani, is also joining us in the gallery today. You are warmly welcomed.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, just on a lighter note, honourable Kuridrani's son is a Wallaby, Sir. He was sorely missed when they got beaten by the Lions. Unfortunately, it was a French referee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister for this Ministerial Statement. It is actually quite important because aviation, statistically, is still the safest form of transportation around the world, but there is a reason for it because there are very strict controls that exist within the aviation industry. These are things that we must not ever take for granted. So, the Ministerial Statement is quite welcomed, and the information that has been given by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister is very important to us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with respect to aviation safety, our sincere condolences to all those who were affected by the Air India incident but, again, it is something that we can learn from. As a small nation in the Pacific, we are quite fortunate recently. We had ICAO open an office recently in Nadi, which benefits not just us, but the entire Pacific Island nations that are around us because that would be the focal point, especially for us to learn from and to abide by it and to ensure that we get all the necessary regulations in place and the necessary things that need to be done because there is a comprehensive planning that is required and training that is required.

However, one of the things that is most critical, Mr. Speaker, as a part of the whole process of air disaster is the emergency response plan. I know that CAAF is very well equipped when this actually happened because they need to conduct regular drills, which I am sure they do, have adequately trained personnel and safety management systems.

One of the easiest places to fall short is what is termed 'human factors'. We can see from a lot of disasters around the world that the human factor may be something that actually causes a lot more problems, but it must also be understood as to why it happens. With the emergency response plans that we have, there is probably only one area that we need to beef up, and I am sure the honourable Minister has actually spoken to the honourable Minister of Finance regarding this, in terms of response, especially in Fiji, and we are talking about the hospital – the Nadi Hospital itself.

I know there has been a lot of talk that we should always be in a state of readiness, because it is an international airport. We are bringing in about a million visitors a year. These are things that we must also put at the forefront of our budget request when we do so because Nadi Hospital is the closest hospital that we have. That particular hospital needs to be, at all times, in a state of readiness, so enough resource allocation needs to be given to them so that that state of readiness has a big green tick in front of it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think we must also pay tribute to all of those who were in CAAF, past and present, who have kept CAAF abreast of everything. At the end of the day, we also need to ensure that our regulations are in check, but again, as I say this, Sir, there is a lot of assistance that we can get from ICAO to make sure that we actually are continuously improving and all of these things are at the forefront of CAAF's mind, especially in terms of aviation safety, and I know the honourable Minister has been working hard to ensure all of this is done.

One of the other things is training and assistance. We have some pretty high-end planes and high-end pilots that actually are, but continuous training is a huge measure with respect to ensuring that we keep that good thing going.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the other things that I think CAAF is also involved in, and it is very important is information sharing. Information sharing with civil aviation organisations around the world will continuously be required so that we also keep abreast of it because that is a very important tool in ensuring our safety standards are the best in the world and comparable to none.

We are a small nation, and we play big, therefore, we must always be at the top when it comes to aviation safety. I take my hat off to all those at CAAF, who have done a phenomenal and a fantastic job, and the honourable Minister, who is ensuring that all of these things are put at the forefront of their mind. I thank you, Sir.

Fiji's Peacekeeping Legacy and the Strategic Role of RFMF in International Operations

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of this august House, ladies, and gentlemen; before I continue with my Statement this morning, may I take this time to join you in welcoming and congratulating the newly appointed Ministers - the new Minister for Agriculture, honourable Tunabuna; the Minister for Information, honourable Tabuya; and the new Assistant Minister for Agriculture, honourable Kuridrani. I would like to join you in wishing them well in the new role that they have been bestowed with today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today in this august House to speak on a matter that rests not only in the realm of the foreign affairs and defence policy, but in the very heart of our national story. The subject of peacekeeping is often presented as a military duty, but it is in truth a moral and civic one. It compels us to reflect not just on our foreign deployments, but on the principles by which we live, the burdens we place on our citizens and the face we choose to show the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I speak on this matter not merely as a Minister, but as someone who has walked the long and quiet road of peacekeeping deployment. I have served in peacekeeping operations, along with the honourable Prime Minister and honourable Members of this august House from across the aisle. We, as peacekeepers, stood under the harsh suns in unfamiliar land, surrounded by unfamiliar languages, carrying the wide expectations of a nation that trusted us to act with restraint, courage and dignity. The uniform that we wore was not only a symbol of Fiji's commitment to international peace but was a visible expression of who we are as a people. To serve as peacekeepers is to carry our duties under constant tension. We are armed, but not aggressive. We are trained for combat but restrained by mandate. We are expected to be visible and composed, even in the face of provocation. We operate far from home,

often without knowing when we will return. With the ever-present knowledge, that peace is fragile and the line between calm and conflict is thin. For those who serve, the toll is not merely professional, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is deeply personal also.

Peacekeeping changes you. It changes your rhythm of life and your view of the world. It also changes your family, and marriages are stretched by silence. Children grow in your absence, and grief is sometimes carried alone. Joy is postponed until you return, and sometimes many do not return at all. Today, I pay tribute to the Fijian peacekeepers who lost their lives in the service of global peace. Their names may not appear in history books, but their sacrifice is written into the moral architecture of this nation. They died not for conquest, but for calm, not for conquest, but for calm; not to impose force, but to uphold order. They stood between warring parties and held the line, often unacknowledged, often unnoticed, but always honourable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since 1978, more than 50,000 Fijians served in peacekeeping operations. We have maintained our continuous presence in some of the world's most volatile regions, from the frozen hills of Mount Hermon in the Golan Heights to the arid plains of Darfur, from the post-conflict streets of East Timor-Leste to the war-torn cities of Iraq. Fijian soldiers have helped secure ceasefires, guard humanitarian corridors and provide stability where the rule of law has collapsed. Our contribution is not defined by numbers, it is defined by presence. When the world calls, Fiji answers. When others withdraw, we often remain. Our peacekeepers are trusted, not because of our geopolitical influence, but because of our moral consistency and our institutional discipline.

There is something about the Fijian way, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the humility, the composure and the respect that makes our soldiers particularly effective in complex and delicate environments. One of the longest standing examples of this is our presence in the Sinai Peninsula under the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO). This mission traces its origin to Camp David Accord of 1978, a moment in history when Egypt and Israel chose peace to end decades of war. That Accord required an independent monitoring mission to oversee the peace, but when the United Nations Security Council failed to reach consensus on a mandate, an alternative Force was formed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji stepped forward, and we have remained in Sinai ever since. For more than four decades, we have contributed to one of the most geopolitically sensitive missions in the world. Our troops have guarded the peace between two former adversaries in a region where instability is never far from the surface. They have worked alongside soldiers from other nations, often with limited resources, under constant surveillance and in the harshest of environments. But the question must now be asked, should we still be there? More broadly, should we continue our peace and commitment in their current form?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the world we live in today is not the world of 1978, it has changed. Peace operations have evolved. The challenges faced by peacekeepers are no longer limited to conventional threats. They now include cyber threats, drones, non-state militias and highly politicised mandates. Missions have become more complex, less defined and often less supported. It is in this evolving context that Fiji must now ask difficult questions. Should we continue to say 'yes' to every request? Should we maintain the same size and scales of our deployment? Should we re-evaluate which mission align with our strategic priorities, our national interests and the wellbeing of our people?

We must also consider whether we have done enough to support our peacekeepers. Are they sufficiently trained for the new operational landscape? Are they well equipped, properly briefed and adequately cared for during and after their missions? Have we, as a nation, honoured their service, not just in words, but in the infrastructure of support? These are not rhetorical questions, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are national questions and national issues. They go to the heart of what it means to be a responsible contributor to global peace.

Mr. Speaker, that is the reason why Government has begun to work on a National Peacekeeping Strategy. This will not be a generic policy document, but will be a serious, comprehensive and forward looking framework and redefines the purpose, scope and nature of Fiji's peacekeeping role. The Strategy will do several things, it will –

- (1) establish clear criteria for the selection of missions;
- (2) articulate what success looks like, not just in military terms but in moral and diplomatic terms;
- (3) ensure that training is standardised and that all personnel are equipped with the tools and the knowledge they need before deployment;
- (4) also include provisions for post-service care, family support and reintegration; and
- (5) ask fundamental questions such as –
 - (i) when does peacekeeping serve our interests and our values?
 - (ii) When does it impose more burden than benefits;
 - (iii) Where can we lead with this act; and
 - (iv) Where might we need to pause and rethink?

These are not signs of retreat, they are marks of our maturity.

Mr. Speaker, Fiji has not only contributed to global missions, they have also played a leadership role in our region through Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI). Fiji helped build the security and institutional frameworks of the Pacific State. We did so with respect, with cultural awareness and with the belief that Pacific solutions must be crafted by Pacific hands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, RAMSI stands as a statement to what is possible when nations commit to the dignity of others. It remains a model of how peacekeeping and peacebuilding can be used together. It reminds us that our region is not immune to instability. Our peacekeeping strategy must also reflect this reality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there will always be those who say that Fiji is too small to matter, but our peacekeepers have proven otherwise. Our soldiers have been the first to arrive and the last to leave in many cases. They have upheld international law not because they had to but because they believed in it. They have shown that moral leadership is not the preserve of the powerful, it is the calling of the principle. Let us not mistake consistency for complacency. Our legacy is worth defending but it is also worth refining. We must adapt our contributions to match the world as it is, not as it was. That is the purpose of the peacekeeping strategy. It will not lessen our reputation, it will strengthen it. It will not reduce our presence, it will enhance our purpose.

Mr. Speaker, peacekeeping is never easy. It is often thankless. It is much more restrained by restraint than recognition but it remains one of the last meaningful instruments through which the world affirms its belief in collective action - in law over force; in hope over despair.

The Government remains fully committed to supporting our peacekeepers - those currently deployed, those planning to go and those who have returned. We will do more than issue medals - we will offer real support. We will do more than praise the discipline. We will match it with policy and we will do more than reflect on their past. We will plan for their future.

Mr. Speaker, let this House, today, speak with one voice. Let us not speak as parties in contest but as a nation in reflection. Let us affirm, not only the words of our past contributions, but the wisdom to guide what is going to come next and may the road ahead be clearer than the one we have travelled so far, and may our decisions be as steady as those who serve. May your legacy endure not only because we served but because we thought, listen, and that we choose wisely.

Vinaka vakalevu, Mr. Speaker. May God bless our peacekeepers, this Parliament and Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for Defence and Veteran Affairs for his Statement. I now invite the Leader of the Opposition or his designate for their response.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on the matter of utmost importance, the peacekeeping legacy and the strategic role of our military - the RFMF, in international operations. Before I dwell on this speech, can I show my gratitude and acknowledge the hard work done by our former Member of Parliament, whom we have lost.

I would like to take this opportunity, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to pass my condolences to the family of former Member of Parliament, Mr. Vijendra Prakash, a career civil servant. I had the opportunity to work with him. We taught at Saraswati College together where he was Assistant Principal and Head of Science. He was a keen and very hardworking social worker, a public servant and a person who sacrificed his personal and family time to serve others. He was one who saved everyone, regardless of race and religion, because he was a very fluent speaker in *iTaukei*. A man who hailed from Vunidawa, his family currently lives in 8 Miles, Nasinu. Sir, the funeral will be tomorrow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the immense pride we all feel as a nation when we see our brave soldiers serving with honour and distinction across the globe. Their sacrifices have cemented Fiji's reputation as a reliable and courageous contributor to global peace and security. They are our heroes, and their legacy is one we must cherish.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as an Opposition Member, it is my duty to not just praise the past but scrutinise the present and the plan for a better future, especially for the very people who have made this legacy possible, our military personnel and their families. While we allow this strategic role on an international stage, we must ask ourselves, are we doing enough to improve their livelihood at home? The answer, I believe, is astounding no. Mr. Speaker, it is time to move beyond merit and focus on tangible practice measures that will genuinely improve the livelihood of our soldiers. The government must shift its focus from the strategic overview that looks good on paper, to the ground-level reality that ensures our servicemen and women are properly cared for.

I propose the following points for consideration and immediate action. Mr. Speaker, Sir. Invest in domestic infrastructure. While we are proud of the RFMF's global deployments, we must not neglect their need at home. We must allocate significant funds to upgrade and modernise their military barracks and housing. Our soldiers deserve to live in safe, dignified, and comfortable accommodation Mr. Speaker, Sir. A secure and well-maintained home life is the bedrock of the soldier's morale and wellbeing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, comprehensive welfare, and aftercare. The current Aftercare Fund, whilst it is good, is not enough. We need more comprehensive and robust welfare systems that support our soldiers, not just during their service, but long after they return home. This includes mental health and support, skilled development, and recognition, equitable compensation, and benefits, which we have neglected. Transparency and accountability, and furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the legacy of Fiji's peacekeeping is not just about the medal and the international recognition, it is about the men and women who earned them. A strong and effective military is not just about its strategic deployment. It is about the health and happiness. It is about the security of the personnel. Let us, as a government and a nation, prove our respect and gratitude to our soldiers, not just with words, but with concrete action that will truly improve their livelihood and secure a better future for them and their family.

I urge the Government to take this recommendation seriously and work with the Opposition to build a military force that is not only a source of national pride abroad, but also a source of dignity and security for its members at home.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank honourable Nath for the response. Before we leave the statement from the honourable Minister, I had the absolute pleasure and privilege to visit our troops, during my term as the Head of the High Commission and Embassy of our country in London, both the troops, our troops in Lebanon and in Sinai. I can only restate my deepest admiration and deepest respect for our peacekeepers in both these areas and I am sure elsewhere in the world where they serve. They carry the name of the country with pride and for the world to see. So, I pay homage to them and wish the peacekeepers well.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise on a Point of Order - Standing Order 61 on judicial proceedings. In this particular case, Sir, the court has not yet found this official. Sentencing is not yet to take place, therefore, we do not see this particular topic as something that Parliament should be talking about, in accordance with Standing Order 61.

MR. SPEAKER.- I am not aware of the details of what the statement is going to be. Are you pre-empting the statement to be delivered by the honourable Minister?

HON. J. USAMATE.- I am thinking that his statement is on the prosecution by the Office of the Director of Public Prosecution (ODPP) in the case of the State vs Justin Ho and Others.

MR. SPEAKER.- I am sorry, I do not get you. Can you repeat that?

HON. J. USAMTE.- I believe the statement that the honourable Minister for Justice will be giving is on the prosecution by ODPP in the case of the State vs Justin Ho and Others. I am raising the Standing Order, as the sentencing of that particular case has not taken place and that it should not be discussed in the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I take the point raised by honourable Usamate. That is essentially what you are going to talk about, is that correct, honourable Acting Attorney-General?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr Speaker, Sir, I have two Ministerial Statements - one is on the ICJ advisory opinion and the other is basically about the rule of law and the work of the public prosecutions in combating crime. It is not specific on that matter, but a general issue.

MR. SPEAKER.- It is not specifically on any case before the Court?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- No, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- We will allow that, unless there is a specific case he will refer to. If it is a general statement on the rule of law, I will allow it.

HON. J. USAMATE.- The title of his Ministerial Statement is 'Ministerial statement on the successful prosecution by the ODPP in the case of the State vs Justin Ho and Others.' The ministerial statement highlights the landmark prosecution in the State vs Justin Ho and Others. The point is that the sentencing has not been completed in this particular case. We should not be talking about it until the sentencing is completed and the matter is resolved.

MR. SPEAKER.- I agree with you but let me hear the Acting Attorney-General. I am not even sure what this case is.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a general statement. In that case, I will withdraw that, and I will speak.

MR. SPEAKER. – That is what I would like to be done, so that there is no specific reference to any case that is before the court. You may do so, please.

HON. S.D. TURAGA. - Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, fellow members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; I join honourable Tikoduadua in warmly congratulating the Minister for Information, honourable Tabuya; honourable Tunabuna as Minister for Agriculture, and my *Naita*, the Assistant Minister for Agriculture.

I rise today, not just as Attorney-General of the Republic of Fiji, but as a proud son of our nation, a son of the Pacific, who has walked through flood-stricken villages, heard the cries of displaced families and seen firsthand the sorrow etched in the faces of those who were forced to abandon their *vanua* due to the severe impacts of climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you are aware, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) delivered its long anticipated advisory opinion on the obligations of States with respect to climate change on 23rd July, 2025 - a historic moment of international justice and renewed hope.

Fiji had the opportunity to make our submissions to the ICJ on the advisory opinion on climate change on the 4th of December 2024, led by my predecessor, *Turaga naita*, Mr. Graham Leung, and supported by former Ambassador, Mr. Luke Daunivalu and senior officials from my office. Fiji's legal submission was premised on three important legal grounds:

- (1) The extensive threat climate change poses to our survival.
- (2) The clear legal obligation the state must uphold; and
- (3) The grave consequences of failing to meet these duties.

Fiji explained to the ICJ and the rest of the world, the harsh reality faced by our people because of the impacts of climate change. Instances such as how –

- the unbearable force of *TC Winston* killed 44 of our people and wiped out one third of our GDP in just 36 hours;
- the village of Vunidogoloa was relocated as a result of the rising sea level, with an additional 45 villages identified for future relocation due to similar climate related threats;
- a mother in Tailevu clung to a crying child during a stormy night;
- a farmer can no longer grow cassava in poisoned soil and elderly from Kadavu no longer hears chants from the church that once stood proudly by the shoreline;
- our *vanua* is being swallowed by the rising seas; and
- cultural heritage slips through our fingers like sand.

Fiji also explained the reputable scientific evidence pointing to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) finding that industrialised States bear overwhelming responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions causing this crisis. The international law principles of preventing harm to others and the rights of small island nations like ours to self-determination, the right to live on our land, to maintain our culture and to chart our own future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji further explained to the Court the cascading consequences of climate change, causing food and water insecurity, biodiversity loss and forced displacement which are not only a crisis of survival, but are crises of equity.

Fiji contributes 0.004 percent of global emissions, yet we pay the highest price. However, even as we suffer, Fiji has passed the Climate Change Act in 2021, establish a Climate Relocation Communities Trust Fund and support regional frameworks on maritime zones and climate mobility. We have taken action because we must. But the truth is, we cannot do this alone. Those who are most responsible must step up.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's submission to the ICJ was both, emotional and deeply principled. It was a defence, not only law, but of life. It affirmed that our constitutional values, human rights, environmental protection and justice are being violated by the unchecked emissions of others. We presented irrefutable evidence of causing irreversible harm; that specific States have failed to meet their obligations, and this failure has real and painful consequences on our people. We relied on fundamental principles of international law, including the obligation to prevent transboundary harm and the right to self-determination. Because island nations' sovereignty is not just about territory, it is also about dignity. It is about being able to pass down the land of our ancestors to the next generation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the ICJ advisory opinion issued on 23rd July is a powerful affirmation of our case. It affirms what Fiji, and its Pacific neighbours have been saying for years – that climate change is a matter of human rights, justice and legal responsibility. In its opinion, the Court clarified that climate change treaties impose binding obligations on States to protect our climate and environment from greenhouse gas emissions. The Court also clarified that customary international law requires States to prevent significant environmental harm, with the emphasis on due diligence and cooperation. Breaches of these obligations constitute international wrongful acts.

The Court further clarified the State's obligations under the international human rights law to respect and ensure the effective enjoyment of human dignity by taking necessary actions to protect the climate system and other aspects of the environment. As a result, responsible States must cease harmful practices and ensure non-repetition of violations and provide reparations to affected States.

The opinion also applies to all States, establishing a duty to act responsibly for Fiji and our Pacific neighbours. It provides a strong legal foundation to enhance climate action, support legal challenges and shape the future of an international climate law. It underscores that climate change involves human rights and legal responsibility, empowering us to demand accountability from high emitters. The opinion confirmed that States have binding obligations under international law, not just under treaties like the Paris Agreement, but also under customary international law, international human rights law and the law of the sea. The State's duty is to reduce emissions, protect ecosystems and safeguard human rights and crucially, that failure to act, can amount to internationally wrongful conduct.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is more than just a legal judgment, it is a moral compass, it is a validation and it is justice. It says to the single mother of Serua, whose home was claimed by the sea - the world sees you. It says to the youth of Fiji who marched in the streets, who speak out on social media, who sit under the coconut trees wondering what the future holds – your voice matters. It says to every Pacific islander who fears waking up to find their village gone – the law stands with you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this ruling matters because it bestows faith in justice, in truth, and in humanity. It says to powerful nations, "Your actions have consequences. Your failure to act is not neutral. It is unlawful. You are no longer shielded by distance or denial. The world is watching, and the law is speaking." It also makes clear that climate justice is not negotiable. It is not a matter of charity, but a matter of duty.

I want to acknowledge the youth of the University of the South Pacific, whose courage sparked this movement, the Government of Vanuatu, whose leadership was unwavering, and the 105 countries who stood with us. This is what solidarity looks like. This is what justice sounds like. With record-

breaking participation, 91 written submissions and 37 oral statements, this is the most engaged case in ICJ history. The tide is turning and the Pacific helped turn it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not the end, it is the beginning of something new – a new era of climate accountability. We call on all States, particularly high emitting nations, to immediately operationalise the loss and damage fund, scale up adaptation support, accelerate emission reductions, and recognise that justice for climate affected communities can no longer be delayed. Fiji will continue to lead with integrity. We protect our oceans and honour our ancestral lands, and we will raise our voice – firm, clear and unrelenting at COP30 and beyond.

Mr. Speaker, this advisory opinion is not just a legal document, it is a lifeline. It is a hope written in the language of justice. It is our ancestors whispering that their legacy will not be drowned. It is our children's future knocking and being answered. To the people of Fiji, your stories matter. Your pain has been heard, your fight has been in vain, to the world, the path is now clear. Let us walk it together, not tomorrow but today. *Vinaka valevu*, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the honourable Minister for Justice and acting Attorney for his statement. I will now call on the Leader of the Opposition or his designate for his response.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister and acting Attorney-General for his statement this morning. I have a brief five minutes, but I could stand here all day and talk about climate change, but I think what is really important is that we realise how this actually began. This actually started in Vanuatu, one of our neighbours. It came out of 15 students of our own University of the South Pacific (USP) and that is such a strong thing for us to remember how this actually began. Vanuatu did not just do it on their own, it did it with the Pacific and it is putting the world's eyes onto the Hague. Now, what the decision has done, although it is an advisory opinion, is put all of those who are anti-climate change and those who are producing fossil fuels, et cetera, that goes into our atmosphere, on notice.

Mr. Speaker, the advisory opinion basically states that all countries are now legally obligated to protect the climate and to prevent harm to it. We have seen what is actually happening around the world with earthquakes and floods, et cetera. As rightfully pointed out by the honourable Minister, it is a problem not of our own making, but it has now given us an avenue with respect to actually being able to do something about it. We have been made to jump through hoops, Mr. Speaker, to try and even get access to climate finance. This helps us in a lot of ways to be able to ensure that we do get that kind of finance to put in the measures that we need to do.

Mr. Speaker, as I have said, I was actually made aware of this when this began, I happened to be in Vanuatu at the time. The decision that has been taken is basically that all States have a legal obligation and a duty to act on climate change. The consequences of any inaction by any State or any country is that if you fail to act and you do not regulate, you can be held accountable for it. However, that is not just to pollution producing nations, but that is to us also as a developing nation.

We must also ensure, Mr. Speaker, that we get it right, in terms of our aspirations, that we actually want to start producing more. We must make sure that our laws are in place and in line with what we have actually signed up to, so we do not produce stuff that actually harm the environment. Existing laws need to be strengthened. So, my point is, whilst we can have all of these, we must also take care of our own neighbourhood, which means every single citizen in this country must now be responsible with respect to anything that affects the climate, whether you are throwing rubbish in the water, or whether you are polluting our seas, et cetera, because we also might, in turn, become liable if someone decides to set up an X, Y, Z factory and it is worth a couple of billion dollars to us.

This decision allows also for us to seek reparation. It will be a phenomenal task to be able to get that done but, at least, it gives us some actual backing so we can actually speak to those that pollute. We must remember that the human health also has become part of it. So, if you suffer from human health issues with respect to climate change, that also opens up another avenue. There is a big call for increased climate change stuff that needs to be done around the world, but from Fiji's perspective, one of the best places and the best forum for us to do this and probably the best way forward is to ensure that within the Pacific Island Forum, honourable Prime Minister, we are now able to do a whole lot more if we do this as a region.

I think everyone probably understands that. I know Australia and New Zealand are also part of it, but they are quite sympathetic as to what transpires. So that would be the forum for us to take this forward. It is a landmark decision, it is a historical decision, but it will help in a lot of ways when we are looking at trying to get even climate finance.

With those few words, I am totally happy that the decision of the ICJ has come out in favour of the Pacific Island nations and those other small other countries, even other countries who are part of the ACP, et cetera, and all the countries that are part of this will look at it and say, thank you very much. I thank the honourable Minister for his Ministerial Statement.

MR. SPEAKER.- May I add that in our meeting of the Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) at the World Conference of Speakers in Geneva last week, the Chair from Barbados, Leader of the Opposition who always chairs alternative meetings had expressed, on behalf of the group, his deepest admiration and total support to Vanuatu and to the South Pacific island countries who initiated the ICJ case, resulting in the opinion in our favour. So, I had undertaken to pass all the message to those responsible.

Forest Subsidy Programme in Fiji

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, and viewers joining us on our mainstream platform; *ni sa yadra vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver my statement on the progress of the forestry subsidy programme in Fiji. This programme is overseen by the Ministry of Forestry, with the main aim of assisting and promoting our forest-based businesses, with a special focus on the rural based and resource owning communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Forestry Subsidy Programme was initiated 10 years ago in 2015. It was initially established to assist forest resource owners in the processing of their forest resources in a sustainable manner for economic gain. The objective of the Programme is to promote the establishment of wood and non-wood-based businesses, with a special focus on rural communities.

Since its establishment, the Forest Subsidy Programme is now also providing financial assistance to forest-based micro, small and medium enterprises with a turnover below \$1.25 million through the purchase of value-adding machines to help in the growth and development of their businesses. The Ministry of Forestry uses this Forestry Subsidy Programme to leverage the use of our forest resources to further develop the MSME sector, which currently contributes over 18 percent to the country's GDP and provides employment to approximately 60 percent of Fiji's labour force.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Programme was allocated a budget of \$50,000 during its initiation in 2015. The Programme was suspended in 2016 due to the impact of *TC Winston*. In 2019, 2020, 2021 and the

first half of 2022, due to the impacts of *TC Harold* and COVID-19 respectively, funds were relocated to the much-needed rehabilitation work and COVID operations. It resumed in the 2022-2023 fiscal year with a reduced budget of \$30,000.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the 2023-2024 fiscal year, under the new Coalition Government, the budget had a significant increase from \$30,000 to \$200,000. This significant increase in the budgetary allocation is a positive sign of our Government's commitment to support our forest-based MSMEs and empower our resource owners and other rural dwellers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the six-year period that the Programme had been active, the Government had spent a total of \$433,788. This Programme has positively contributed to the growth of forest-based MSMEs which have benefited our local communities. To date, 46 businesses ranging from individuals, small groups, cooperatives and companies have received some form of assistance through this Programme.

When the Programme resumed in the 2022-2023 fiscal year, the Ministry of Forestry decided to take a different approach and focus on mahogany landowners to utilise the waste wood that is left in the forest after logging operations by Fiji Hardwood Corporation Limited (FHCL). The decision was made due to the availability of forest resources and also in line with the provisions under the Mahogany Industry Development Act 2010, to enhance the participation of our resource owners in forestry business. This was done in partnership with FHCL and the Fiji Mahogany Trust using the PPP concept.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry started with the training of 19 youth, including four women from Vugalei District in the Tailevu Province for six months at the Ministry of Forestry's Timber Industry Training Centre in Nasinu. After the training, graduates were further assisted with the provision of value adding machines, including the establishment and registration of the Gaunavou Cooperative Limited for the District of Vugalei. The Ministry assisted the cooperative in securing a market supplying wooden furniture products to Courts' Vision Group. In addition, the Gaunavou Cooperative is also registered with the Ministry of Trade as a supplier of Fiji Made brand products.

Mr. Speaker, to date, with the \$30,000 forestry subsidy assistance from the Ministry of Forestry and the use of a workshop space with electricity and water and other technical assistance, the Gaunavou Cooperative has produced over 170 beds with a market value of \$150,000. The Cooperative launched their export product samples to Samoa and Tonga in May this year.

Mr. Speaker, the Gaunavou Cooperative is still operating from a facility in Nasinu, going through business incubation and mentoring programmes. We are confident that these incubation programmes will lay the foundation to enhance their current business agreement with Courts Vision Group and also help them access other resources, infrastructure and guidance to develop new business ideas and establish their own manufacturing facilities.

Mr. Speaker, in the 2023-2024 fiscal year, a total of 16 individuals and groups were recipients of our assistance under the Programme. I would like to share two such individuals with you today, Mr. Speaker, one being Mr. Viliame Koiroko, who runs a small joinery and woodworking business based at Nabukadra Village on the Nakorotubu Coast in Ra. He had received \$2,969 in assistance for value-adding machines which included wood carving tools, chainsaws and other equipment. He is now providing a valuable service to communities along the Nakorotubu Coast in Ra, and you can also follow him on *Facebook* under the name 'Koiroko Joinery', for more information.

Secondly, Mr. Paras Ram, who runs his own business, - 'Ram Industries', - had his workshop partially damaged due to a fire. The programme assisted him with a grant of \$16,150 to purchase value-adding machines and replacement of some building materials to help his business recover. His business

is now in full operation again and he is selling wooden products between the Waila-Nausori-Koronivia corridor.

Mr. Speaker, this programme has impacted a small number of individuals, businesses and communities in Fiji but has the potential to grow and provide more positive impacts to our forest-based rural communities. The Minister of Forestry is also working on a system to keep track of all recipients of this assistance and to try and capture their contribution to the national economy.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry is also committed to expanding this programme nationally in future to support our forest-based MSMEs. The increased budgetary allocation and partnership with communities, forest-based cooperatives and MSMEs will enhance economic opportunities for our people, while encouraging and supporting our ultimate goal of sustainable forest management.

Mr. Speaker, looking back over the last 10 years, the Ministry of Forestry has learned a lot of lessons from this programme. The progress of the programme over the years has been a mixture of both successes and failures. Moving forward, the Ministry of Forestry plans to add two other components to improve our implementation of the Forest Subsidy Programme, which are to:

- (1) improve the selection criteria to ensure fairness and transparency; and
- (2) put in place an effective monitoring and evaluation framework that will enable us to carry out bi-annual monitoring of each recipient for at least three years after receiving the assistance.

This might include the signing of an agreement between the Ministry and the recipient as a binding document.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Forestry will continue to focus on sustainable forest management, capacity building, and research to improve the economic contribution of our forest-based MSMEs and industries.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, may I join other speakers in congratulating honourable Tunabuna, honourable Tabuya, and my LMS OB and *tauvu*, honourable Kuridrani, for the positions that they have been assigned to.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to thank the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry on her Ministerial Statement. Subsequently, I wish to thank everyone who contributed to this great initiative. The programme under this project will greatly assist resource owners in Fiji. At this day, Mr. Speaker, processing and value-adding will provide much-needed employment to the resource owners and the wider communities around the area.

I understood yesterday, during the discussions and debate on the annual reports, the subject of export of wood chips versus timber was discussed. The statement by the honourable Minister today greatly injects energy into our re-thinking of the value of our timber resources within Fiji. The subject on the return of wood chips versus timber products and value-adding to maximise return. The resources in the maritime islands and isolated communities can benefit out of this initiative, where pine or mahogany can be harvested and timber be sawn using portable sawmills to produce timber products.

Mr. Speaker, maritime islands pine scheme can greatly benefit by milling pine and produce the materials for building houses and reduce the cost of transporting of building materials from the main centres, which can be cheaper and materials can be readily available to our isolated communities.

Mr. Speaker, I understand there are portable machines that are available now that can produce timber for a complete house in the isolated communities. I understand there are miser machines that can actually manufacture flooring, the house structures and the walling. If these portable machines are made available to resource owners, they can actually mill their timber, have it treated and sold locally within the island communities.

I also wish to thank the honourable Minister and hope that the resource owners around Fiji, in the maritime islands and the isolated resource owners in Vanua Levu and Viti Levu take benefit of this initiative and use it for the benefit of their communities and the communities around the area that they live in. I appreciate the momentum that this initiative has taken with the increase in budgetary allocations. This will increase the commercial activities around the areas where our resource owners live, reside and enjoy their life.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before we suspend the proceedings for lunch, I will very quickly go back and revisit Item No. 4, that is, the Presentation of Reports of Committees, and specifically, in this instance, the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs.

The two reports will be withdrawn from today's Order Paper and will be inserted in tomorrow's Order Paper. Further, the Chairman has agreed, and with the consent of the honourable Minister for Environment and Climate Change, to move his Statement to tomorrow. That means that the Ministerial Statement for today is now exhausted, and when we resume after lunch, we move on to Item No. 6 on Questions.

Honourable Members, we will now suspend proceedings for lunch and Parliament will resume at 2.30 p.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.26 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.40 p.m.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Targets for Reduction of Burglary and Drug-Related Offences (Question No. 85/2025)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Policing inform Parliament on the specific quantifiable targets and public reporting mechanisms that have been set for reducing the rates of burglary and drug-related offences in identified red zone areas by December 2025?

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a good solid question. The Fiji Police Force takes the security of the nation and its people seriously. In doing so, it is actively implementing strategic measures to keep our home safe and secure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Commissioner of Police runs a tight ship – a well-oiled, well-lubricated, and a ship that cannot afford to be not heading in the right direction. At this point, I believe the Commissioner of Police is doing a good job about it – feeling the correct heartbeat, understanding the situation and putting into place the right strategies to take us forward. To deliver a safe and secure home for all of us, he has a solid regional grouping. I want to speak on this at this point, before I talk on two of the important issues of the question to have a broad understanding of how the Commissioner runs the operations.

There are five divisions – five various fronts from the Western, Northern, Eastern, Central and Southern Divisions. In addition to that, there are other key components of the Fiji Police Force, and for the Commissioner and his team to be able to feel the correct heartbeat, they analyse daily those instant reports that come to them. I meet the Commissioner on a weekly basis to discuss not only areas of concerns, but above all to map and look at the future outlooks of our strategic picture. In doing so, we quickly look into the other areas that are of concern, especially the issue that has been raised in this question – our red zones in the various divisions.

The Fiji Police Force sets specific quantifiable targets on crime reduction. With those targets measured across five key crime sectors: aggravated robbery, burglary, rape, robbery and defilement of minors, and drugs is another very important part of these five sectors. The main quantifiable targets are set across two main areas, that is in crime reduction rates and crime detection rates. Simply, if the crime arrow is ascending, that is a worry, it should be descending. And if the detection arrow is ascending and not descending, that is of concern. So the crime arrow should be descending and the detection rate should be ascending.

Two key areas where the focus is generally, a 10 percent reduction in overall crime is the benchmark. Second, when we talk about detection rates, there is to be at 70 percent detection rate for all reported crimes. While these are good terms that we could use in the work of the police force, we should be mindful that crime by nature is volatile, opportunity seeking and in many crime categories, unplanned. So we cannot really put our finger in many occasions to determine the quantifiable aspects of crime.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, every day the Fiji Police Force issue a Daily Situation Report (DSR) or the morning reports; it comes at 4 o'clock in the morning. In this particular report, it summarises the events of the last 24 hours. It also has a good coverage of the various statistics. Every month the command group of the Commissioner would brief the Commissioner on the various statistics of crime that has

occurred for that particular month. I have here in detail those figures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the police effort to improve the security situation and reduce crime, I am thankful that the Government of the day has committed a substantial amount of funds to improve the boots on the ground visibility and our engagement. When this comes into effect, it will significantly improve the operational situation of looking after our home here in Fiji.

Public Reporting Mechanisms, the Police Force has a well-established public reporting mechanism, primarily through its network of 35 police stations and 78 community posts across Fiji. Crime reports are received directly at these stations or reported to these stations. Additionally, the Police Force actively engages with the public through media releases, social media reforms, radio talk shows, and television programmes. One such example is the Crime Stoppers Programme on our local television station, which is a public facing initiative in assisting the police on:

- (1) raise awareness on prevalent crimes;
- (2) locate missing persons; and
- (3) stolen vehicles and wanted subjects.

This is the public platform that the police engage the public with. These platforms provide the public with direct engagement opportunities to discuss outcomes and monitor the progress of the situation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will now focus on what is referred to as the Red Zone. The Red Zone is basically a term designated to areas where there is an increase in incidents of crime or the likelihood of a potential increase in that particular area or it could also be the different types of high profile incidents that has occurred in that particular place. I have here too, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a very detailed map of the various red spots all over the region, including my home in Taveuni which has about four red zones. It also covers Ba, Rakiraki, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our efforts in the Fiji Police Force and together with the Ministry of Policing is, in the new fiscal year, there will be a surge and increase in the aggression of the momentum of Police work from August to September and October and you will notice this ,in a lot of the areas that have been shaded in red.

However, the need to change the red to the other colour code which is green is really not the Police's role alone. There is great emphasis now on the Police to work closely with the community in what we call the Duavata Community Policing. For these operations to work, it needs the support of the public and a very close collaboration between the Police and the public through trust and the building of confidence.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Minister for his response and, of course, we wish him and the Fiji Police Force well in the work they undertake. A simple question, honourable Minister, you talked about detection investigation right through to prosecution. Police is very specialised as well. Are you happy with the level of training capacity within the Fiji Police Force so they can be more effective in their role as part of the justice system? Are there any gaps and what are the options that we have in place to address those gaps?

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for his question. The Fiji Police Force, like any organisation, has its own internal challenges and likewise, external. A major part of the focus of the uplift programme is to improve the capacity of the Fiji Police Force in addressing , not only the current challenging issues, but emerging issues in the crime landscape and also make sure that we have the right fit at the right places. I am talking about officers, men and

women, of the Force, so a lot of capacity building.

We have also gone out in cooperation with our development partners, New Zealand, Australia and the UK in helping and assisting us to project ourselves forward. This also includes the digitalisation of some of our Divisions and that will come into force in the not too distant future.

The visit by the honourable Prime Minister and the high level group who were there with him, from the Police perspective, we are able to engage the Australian Federal Police, again, on very specific areas where we want them to come and help us in, which includes the Counter Narcotics Bureau.

Passenger Safety At Sea
(Question No. 86/2025)

HON. S. NAND asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport update Parliament on the measures being undertaken by MSAF to ensure passenger safety at sea?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. The Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF) is committed to ensuring the safety of life at sea and the protection of the marine environment. This commitment is further reinforced with MSAF's 5-Year Strategic Plan 2024-2025.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, MSAF ensures the commitment to safety of lives achieved by ensuring the following:

- (1) Ships are serviced every six months to ensure they are seaworthy and in safe condition for passengers at all times. As part of the survey, the following non-exhaustive items are subject to survey ship - machinery, lifesaving equipment, firefighting equipment, radio, navigation systems and hull structure.
- (2) Maritime service providers must also be recognised by MSAF prior to being engaged by MSAF to carry out certain roles. These providers are audited periodically by MSAF to ensure compliant standards are being met. These include boat builders, naval architects, life raft service centres, firefighting equipment service centres, life-saving equipment and underwater equipment.
- (3) MSAF also engages recognised classification societies in terms of ship survey-related work. This partnership is useful for situations where MSAF is unable to deploy its surveyors abroad for imminent survey such as hull thickness survey.
- (4) Only qualified and certified masters and crew are permitted to serve on board in compliance with the Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping Convention and Fiji's maritime laws. The Authority administers oral assessments for the upgrade of licences and these assessments are to verify competency in navigation, ship handling, engineering and safety procedures. Overall, licences are revalidated based on a five-year cycle, service records, medical fitness and compliance with required safety refresher training.
- (5) The Authority ensures that ships are issued with minimum manning certificates to ensure every ship has sufficient, qualified and competent personnel on board to operate the vessel safely, efficiently, and in compliance with national maritime laws.

- (6) For vessels less than 15 metres, trainings and certification is provided whereby boat operators are required to obtain Boat Master Licence, Restricted Master Licence with qualification. It provides the essential navigational, safety and seamanship skills required for safe vessel operation.
- (7) MSAF audits and approves maritime training providers to ensure its syllabus meets national legal requirements and standards of the International Maritime Organization (IMO), particularly for passenger ship operations.
- (8) The domestic shipping industry also has in its service some foreign seafarers, whose certificates are recognised by MSAF. Strict criteria under the Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping Convention is implemented by MSAF, to ensure that such foreign seafarers are competent, thus ensuring safety at sea.
- (9) The enforcement and compliance officers stationed at major ports and jetties conduct marine clearance checks that entails the enforcement of safety of passengers and cargoes during loading and unloading, as well as ensuring that the number of passengers and weight of cargo loaded does not exceed what is stated in the survey certificate. That is to avoid overloading of cargo and passengers.
- (10) The verification of vessel documents are always conducted prior to vessel departure to ensure these are valid. These include:
 - (i) life-saving appliances certificate;
 - (ii) certificates of competency of masters and crew;
 - (iii) firefighting appliance certificate;
 - (iv) fumigation certificate where relevant;
 - (v) Ship Radio Licence;
 - (vi) Coasting Trade Licence;
 - (vii) Minimum Manning Certificate;
 - (viii) Survey Certificate;
 - (ix) passenger manifest;
 - (x) cargo manifest; and
 - (xi) crew list.

Safety checks are also conducted on board to ensure that all equipment are fully operational.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, in terms of maritime safety, not just for passengers, how far are we from getting or domesticating the high-speed craft legislation that needs to be put in because the operators are now bringing the high-speed craft to service the centres that we actually have? How far are we away from domesticating the legislations that are required with respect to that?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- There are international conventions relating to that, which is what the MSAF is relying on at the moment. In the meantime, Cabinet has approved the review of the MSAF Act, and we are working urgently with various stakeholders, including our international development partners, to ensure that this is done quickly and to align our maritime laws with international requirements.

HON. S. NAND.- For ships that fail to comply with mechanical or other issues, what are the processes that are involved in grounding these vessels?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- We have faced situations, as mentioned by the honourable Member. They had breakdowns, mechanical issues, for various reasons. In such cases, the Master bears

the responsibility to immediately make contact with MSAF to notify the incident with the relevant details. This also covers the Master's assessment of the situation, including the status of the ship and of the passengers, crew and cargo. The applicable weather conditions are also taken into account, as this will dictate the nature of response. Sir, MSAF will liaise with the shipowner on his cause of action to ensure safe evacuation of passengers and crew and the safe towage of the vessel into port. Again, safety of passengers and crew is top priority.

A navigational warning is also issued by MSAF to all mariners of the coordinates of the incident. This is to ensure the safety of navigation of that particular region. Sir, MSAF will also coordinate with the Fiji Maritime Search and Rescue Coordinating Centre (FMSRCC), for search and rescue services deployment.

Thereafter, the Master or owner must submit an incident report to MSAF within 24 hours of arrival into port for the purposes of safety and investigations to be conducted. Once the ship is in port, the vessel is detained or no clearance is issued until the cause of the mechanical issues are properly identified and rectified by the shipowner. Sir, MSAF will verify this through a special survey of the ship, which the shipowner must comply and apply for and also pay.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is in regards to the safety of students. Boats have been given to schools. My question to the honourable Minister is, who is responsible for the safety of the students?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Sir, as I have already mentioned, the onus is on the shipowner or the operator to comply, in terms of the passenger load, cargo, but also importantly, ensuring the number of safety occupants on board. For example, life jackets must match the number of passengers on board. That also applies for students.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question is related to inter-island shipping. We know and we have seen that during Christmas period festivity, the ships are overcrowded and that is another safety concern. Whether the Ministry has imposed any penalties on shipowners for not complying with the rules?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Yes, that situation was faced during the last Christmas period and even during school holidays. Investigations revealed that there was a mismatch between the capacity of the ship and the number of tickets sold, so now we have discussed and instructions have been issued to closely monitor the number of passenger tickets sold matches the capacity of that ship.

In terms of penalties, again, that is an issue in terms of the current Act across the various range of offences. It is either too lenient or the enforcement part is not clear. That is why we are going through the whole Act to ensure that there is teeth in what we do. Also, when someone is penalised, they really feel it. So, it is not only a big fine, but some should be subject to imprisonment, given the safety of passengers. Not only that, but also when we look at how they deal with the old ships and the damage to the environment.

Upgrading Qualification for ECE Teachers
(Question No. 87/2025)

HON. H. CHAND asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Education inform Parliament on which specific step under Band F would an existing ECE teacher be placed after upgrading their qualification to a degree?

HON. A. M. RADRODRO. - I thank the honourable member for the question, and I would like to start with a bit of background.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, first, I would like to express my appreciation to the honourable Prime Minister and the People's Coalition Government for the revised remuneration package that the pre-primary kindergarten teachers will receive from May 17th of 2025.

Given the significant humble beginnings of ECE in the 1940s, as the honourable Member may be aware of, a few centres were established with expatriate spouses in Suva. We now have 875 ECE centres serving around 18,300 students nationwide, with over 1,423 ECE teachers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since 2023, the Ministry of Education has recruited an additional 170 ECE teachers around Fiji. It is also important to acknowledge the journey of the ECE teachers as already alluded to yesterday by the honourable Member.

In 2012, ECE teachers were paid as little as \$300 per term equivalent to \$21.42 per week. Despite this, they continue to serve with passion, commitment and resilience. Many of the ECE teachers continue to serve even without a fair remuneration, because they are driven by a sense of calling to the noble profession. These teachers accommodate the expenses for their families with these meager amounts.

We continue to have ongoing reforms in the ECE sector. As I mentioned yesterday, the Pre-Primary Policy Handbook and the implementation of a full-day program for the holistic development of the child. These reforms are part of the long term plan to professionalise and elevate the status of pre-primary education in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to answer the question, all classroom and assistant pre-primary teachers are remunerated based on their qualifications, which is according to the Ministry of Education remuneration policies. This has been revised over the years in accordance with Bands D, E and F. Specific salaries within this band differ depending on their experience and the results of their job test, interview process, OMRS and the appointment letters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the qualification level and corresponding salary bands are as follows:

- (1) Teachers with certificate in this year are placed under Band D, as the honourable member would be fully aware of as a former director of human resources for the Ministry of Education;
- (2) Teachers with Diploma in ECE fall under Band E; and
- (3) Teachers who hold Bachelor in ECE are classified in Band F.

Based on the current payroll records, ECE teachers are placed across the following bands and steps:

- (1) Band F Step 1 – Two teachers;
- (2) Band F Step 3 – 104 Teachers;
- (3) Band E - 658 Teachers;
- (4) Band D – 659 Teachers, according to their qualifications as I have alluded to earlier.

That brings a total number of ECE teachers currently in service to 1,422.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his very detailed response, which I appreciate. We all know that there is acute shortage of ECE teachers and primary school teachers worldwide, and there are countries who are giving away permanent residents overnight

to attract them. What we have come to know, there are teachers who have completed their degree in 2023, they are still waiting for the salary upgrade. I would like to ask the honourable Minister what he intends to do about that, because the last time, the salary upgrade portion was not included in the budget? If he can update the House what he intends to do?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have already alluded to during my budget response that we will pay out the qualification upgrade, but it depends on the timing of the submission. The same case was also alluded to by the honourable Member that they graduated in 2023, but they submitted their records late in 2024 and 2025. Because they fall outside of the payment period, they will have to be accommodated when the new financial year starts.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, can I kindly request the honourable Minister if I forward a few names to him, can he consider the situation some of these teachers are in? I want a commitment here.

MR. SPEAKER.- Do you wish to, or would you rather wait?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- She has to declare her interest first.

(Laughter)

Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Legislative Review and Policy Reform
(Question No. 88/2025)

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Justice and Acting Attorney-General update Parliament on the legislative review and policy reform for the expungement of irrelevant convictions over 10 years to enhance employment and visa opportunities?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in June this year, Cabinet approved a legislative review for the expungement of irrelevant convictions over 10 years old. It will also consider policy reform in the area of spent convictions to enhance employment and visa opportunities.

The intention of the review, amendments and policy reform is to facilitate the non-disclosure of, and or removal of criminal records involving only those convicted of minor offences, where the said offences are more than 10 years old, and offenders are rehabilitated, and individuals aiming to improve employment and visa application opportunities. This will be done while maintaining public safety, aligning with international rehabilitation standards and migration requirements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the drafting and implementation of these legislative amendments and policy reforms will support reintegration efforts and enhance international recognition of Fiji's rehabilitation framework. The Ministry of Justice has established a taskforce comprising of senior representatives from the Ministry of Employment, Office of the Attorney-General, Fiji Law Reform Commission, Fiji Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission and the Fiji Police Force. This taskforce has been tasked with reviewing the issue of expunging outdated convictions over 10 years old and recommending legislative amendments and policy interventions. The goal is to strike a balance between public safety, justice and successful reintegration of individuals into society.

Upon completion of the internal administrative process of the terms of reference, the consultation will be held where we anticipate that there will be extensive discussions and deliberations on various sections of the Rehabilitation of Offenders (Irrelevant Convictions) Act of 1997. There are practical and relevant provisions in the Act that will form the basis of the legislative review and reform.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many visa and employment opportunities application processes require disclosure of all past convictions, regardless of their relevance or how much time has passed. This creates unnecessary barriers for rehabilitated individuals, seeking employment, family reunification overseas. In fact, several approved employers under the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations, Bilateral Labour Mobility Programme Support Workers who had proven themselves in previous engagements, but now are unable to participate due to updates in police records. These Amnesty, Expungement, Sealing (AEES) are willing to continue supporting workers, now impacted by minor or irrelevant convictions.

Our Coalition Government understands the impact that irrelevant and historic convictions can have on employment and visa opportunities for our people. That is why a legislative review to review the law and expungement with irrelevant convictions and consider policy reform and direction on spent convictions is underway in my Ministry. The process will include several public consultations, review and drafting of relevant legislation following proper legislative processes.

Mr. Speaker, I intend to bring a Bill to introduce the necessary changes, to ensure that the law operates in a way that aligns with the principle of rehabilitation and fairness. These reforms aim to ensure that individuals are not continually punished for historic convictions, that limit their employment opportunities and ability to provide for their families. It is important to get the reform of the law in this area right.

The law in Fiji must be fit for purpose, cognizance of the punitive impact historic convictions can have on individuals employment and visa prospects. We know that the Rehabilitation of Offenders (Irrelevant Convictions) Act of 1997 is not in line with comparative laws. In that regard, I invite Members of this august House to be part of the review and reform process when it begins. It is by working together, that we will be able to bring about a much needed legislative reform, using the mechanisms of the Fiji Law Reform Commission, Attorney-General's Chambers and with wide consultation with our partners, both foreign and domestic, including the Fiji Corrections Service to achieve the necessary legislative changes.

Relocation Programme – Savusavu Rubbish Dump
(Question No. 89/2025)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister touched upon it yesterday and we had a bit of a conversation, but I think there is a little bit more information that is needed.

Can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government update Parliament on the relocation programme of the refuse dump in Savusavu?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. I rise today to speak on a matter which are both, environmental urgency and public health significance, the relocation of the current dump site in Savusavu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the existing dump site, although historically convenient, is no longer suitable in the face of modern environmental realities and the evolving waste management needs of the town. The existing dumpsite is managed by the Savusavu Town Council and located at Naqere, approximately two

kilometres from the main town area. The land area covers approximately 2,000 square metres of Crown *tiri* land known as Qaraniqatio.

Since the commencement of dumping operations at the Naqere site, it has become a dumping ground for all kinds of wastes, inclusive of those generated from residential, those from resorts and hotels, commercial, industrial, as well as chemical sources and approximately 5,800 tonnes of waste is collected and disposed of annually at the Savusavu Dump. The current Savusavu refuse dumpsite is posing a serious and growing threat to our marine ecosystems around Savusavu.

The plans for a new landfill for Savusavu, as I have said yesterday during my response to the motion, will be part of the Na Vualiku Project being led by the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation. A funding of \$6.5 million has been allocated for the landfill project for Savusavu, as well as for Labasa. The project is finalising the terms of reference for the technical design of solid waste management priority investments in Vanua Levu, which will go to the market most probably this month.

A key part of the consultancy will be identifying a new landfill site in consultation with local authorities, landowners and iTaukei Land Trust Board. This will allow us to assess potential site suitability, including land access, environmental risks, and how close it is to communities, tourism areas and water sources. The project team based in Savusavu have already met with the Turaga ni koro as well as the Turaga ni Mataqali to identify suitable sites that can be proposed for a landfill in Savusavu. All site selection processes will be guided by an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), in accordance with the Environment Management Act 2005.

Once a preferred site is confirmed, the consultant will support our next steps, including advising on formal lease arrangements and planning for the necessary infrastructure. That will include preparing bidding documents for the construction of the landfill and associated facilities through a Public-Private Partnership, using either a Design-Build or Design-Build-Operate model.

At the same time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Na Vualiku Project Team will identify urgent improvements to the existing dumpsite in Savusavu, which is very important, such as fencing, better site layout and stopping open burning, to reduce health and environmental risks in the short term. A transition plan will be developed to manage waste until the new site is ready. These interim measures will follow environmental mitigation guidelines and be supported by environmental monitoring, under the guidance of the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change.

Work will also be taken to prepare plans and documents needed to close and rehabilitate the current site once a new landfill is in place, ensuring a smooth and safe shift to improve waste management in the area. The relocation of the site is something that the people, especially hotels and resort operators, as well as the ratepayers and residents, have been asking for a long time. It has reached its capacity and this is the right time to relocate the current dumpsite.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst the site is being sought out, as you mentioned, there is still a lot of marine pollution issues that are actually occurring because one of the borders is right into the sea. What are the measures that have been put into place on that particular site at the moment to at least curb that somewhat whilst the other site is being sought?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have visited the site twice during my term as the Minister and this is also an area of concern for me in terms of its impact to the environment. The Savusavu Town Council through its Special Administrator as well as executive management are also doing some rehabilitation work on the site right now because it is near the coast and the mangroves. There is a likelihood of waste leached out into the sea. Something we are doing now is to protect the side of the dump that is closer to the mangrove area.

Standing Trees Compensation Policy
(Question No. 90/2025)

HON. S. KUMAR asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts update Parliament on the Water Catchment Standing Trees Compensation Policy?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question, an important initiative led by the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs in partnership with our landowners, technical experts and conservation organisations. This policy is being developed to provide fair and structured compensation to landowners who are protecting our natural water catchment areas, especially those with mature standing trees. These trees play a vital role in filtering rainwater, preventing soil erosion and ensuring a clean, sustainable water supply for our communities and ecosystems.

Many of these catchment areas are located on the customary *iTaukei* land, and for many years, landowners have played a quite but essential role in protecting these forests without any direct financial return. This policy is about correcting that. It recognises their contribution and ensure they are fairly rewarded for protecting one of our most critical natural assets - water.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have completed consultations across the Northern, Western and Central Eastern Divisions. These discussions involves landowners, land owning units, provincial councils, conservation groups and relevant Government departments. The feedback received has helped shaped the policy to reflect the real needs and concerns of the land owners.

Mr. Speaker, two pilot case studies were carried out in Magodro and Nasolo water catchment areas. These case studies helped test how compensation framework would work on the ground in real life settings where communities are actively managing the protecting forested land.

A key milestone was a national workshop held on 17th April, 2025, bringing together landowners, technical experts and stakeholders to review and validate the draft compensation policy. The workshop allowed everyone to sit at the same table; traditional leaders, environmental scientists and policymakers, to agree on the principle behind the policy. This is good, not just for the landowners, but for the nation as a whole.

The development of the Standing Trees Compensation Policy is well on track. There are some areas of concerns from the Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) and some Government agencies that need time to carry out more consultations on these issues. It is one that reflects our value, our responsibility and our vision for a more sustainable Fiji.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I thank the honourable Minister for his reply to the question. I think there has been a longstanding issue with those that manage water and own the water management catchment areas. It is important to keep those trees intact for the quality of our water. One question that comes to mind, however, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the honourable Minister is in a position to be able to answer this, how would that compensation be paid, is it from WAF that issues the water? Would it be the State or who is it? Would it be the taxpayers that would bear the compensation? I believe that there is a need for some compensation. I would just like to get to grips with the idea of how or who would be paying.

HON. I. VASU.- Thank you for the question, honourable Member, the view is that the payment will be done by those who lease the land. In most of the cases for WAF, it is leased by the Lands Department.

Update on Rent Freeze
(Question No. 91/2025)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics update Parliament on the ongoing rent freeze?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. Maybe in a supplementary, a motivation for asking this question will come up, but let me just give some background.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, rent freeze was introduced by the military regime on 2nd March, 2007. This freeze originally applied to both commercial and residential properties. However, commercial rental control was lifted on 6th April, 2009, while control on residential rent have continued for over 18 years now, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Let me rephrase this. Rent freeze is something that you put forward in an environment where there is an unprecedented event, because any kind of rent freeze can have a perverse incentive if it is allowed to persevere or stay on for too long, and I will explain that, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This is exactly what has happened, because this has been there for almost 18 years. It has created all kinds of incentives, particularly perverse incentives.

So, it may have been well-intentioned at that time, because the inflation rate was very high. In 2009 we had a devaluation, there was lack of confidence, supply of housing was very bad, so all these things were happening around that time. In some sense, the longevity of the freeze has led to counterproductive outcomes, and in fact, created many loopholes.

Firstly, the rent freeze has not been effective and actively enforced, given the lack of proper legal framework and guidelines and resources to administer this. In practise, this restrictive policy has led to many informal, off-the-record rental agreements, and people will use all sorts of means to ensure that they can get around this. So, basically, there was no monitoring, no legal backing to ensure that whatever the intention was, it was achieved. This has led to a lot of conflicts between the landlords and the tenants. In fact, there are about 8,000 complaints lodged with FCCC since 2010.

Secondly, given that residential rent has been fixed for at least 18 years, without any review, rental properties have physically deteriorated. Those, Mr. Speaker, Sir, who have rented out their property, because they cannot increase the rent, they have left it like that. For tenants, it has resulted in very bad conditions, and basically homeowners lack the financial incentive to improve and make sure that the properties are well looked after.

It has also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, reduced the incentive for new investment. I know that people who build – so two things happened. One, it reduced the incentive to build new homes because they feel that the cost of building now and the furnishing of the flats, compared to what the rent they will get, is not going to be very good. And even if the starting rent is high, they will not be able to increase it. So what has happened, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is, those who have put in new supply have actually started with a very high base.

If you build some new flats in Nakasi where the rental would be \$500 or \$600 per month, the owner will actually go for \$800 to \$900 because he or she feels that they may not be able to increase their rent in the foreseeable future because the rent freeze has been there for too long. So that has also

happened, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Many of those who are investing, in fact, there is a big increase in, accommodation being given out on Airbnb rather than long-term rental contracts. There are numerous other loopholes in incentives that have been created as a result of this prolonged 18-year freeze. There have been numerous calls to review and change the policy, and I know it happened during the previous government's time. I think honourable Kumar was the Minister responsible for FCCC and rent freeze when this proposal was actually made to review the rent freeze. This is what I am told by FCCC. I think honourable Kumar was...

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- That was your election promise.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I will come to that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government is reviewing rent control, together with the finalisation of the Landlord and Tenancy Bill, which is in its final stages of drafting. The legislation will –

- clearly define the rights and responsibilities of both landlords and tenants, which they failed to do;
- introduce an electronic landlord registration system;
- provide transparent rent calculation methods;
- establish a Rent Tribunal for timely and affordable dispute resolution; and
- facilitate tax compliance and proper data collection through landlord registration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is taking a while, so in response to your question, and I know you will say that this was what we had promised but we are actually working on it. Because it has been there for 18 years, if we do not do it properly, if we just lift it tomorrow, then there will also be abuse. There will be other sets of incentives that will be created. What we want to do is to make sure that this legislation, the Landlord and Tenancy Bill, is properly drafted, carefully calibrated and implemented so that there is enforcement, there is a clear check and balance, that it is not abused again as it has been abused for the last 18 years.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his very detailed explanation. Let me just make a simple question here in relation to the demand and supply.

We already know that in urban and peri-urban area, demand is more than what we can supply, so that is already there. In informal settlements, the houses are going on rent for about \$500, so forget about a flat, that would be even more. How will this particular policy, the honourable Minister is talking about – the legislation itself – will ensure the price of the rental properties do not go very high, considering what people are going through in terms of finding a property?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, our approach will be, first, to deregulate ground rent and high end residential rentals. Secondly, we can gradually retain all residential rents, or above a certain threshold to market determination. I think that would be the best thing to do. The third approach that we will take, is to continue monitoring the housing market to assess whether the rent stabilisation policy – which limits annual increases – would be more appropriate than a blanket freeze.

One of the reasons why we do not want to rush is, an abrupt end or removal of freeze without proper safeguards, could result in exploitation. The market has already changed and 18 years is a long time. This is the problem. Any government puts out policy, there are always unintended consequences. The intention of the policy could be good, but the actual consequences of the policy could be completely different from what the intention is. That is why governments get it wrong. There are policies that we

put in place, will have to be reviewed. Unfortunately, these policies were not reviewed for such a long time, and that has caused all kinds of perverse incentives, and has resulted in a situation where tenants are actually now affected themselves.

It was supposed to protect them, but it has actually gone the other way around. For a while it protected the tenants, when you have certain unusual situation, an economic downturn or depression or a big natural disaster, over a certain period of time. As a policy response, you put a freeze, and for this period of time, you cannot do this. But after that, it ought to be reviewed and looked at how it was. That is what we will do. Once the legislation comes into Parliament, the honourable Members will have an opportunity to also contribute. That will be the best approach to deal with the rent freeze.

Land Buy Back Scheme – 1989 and 1993
(Question No. 92/2025)

HON. J.R. VOCEA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources update Parliament on the Land Buy Back Scheme from 1989 and 1993?

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry, through its Land Use Division, is responsible, and was tasked from the early days to administer this Land Buy Back Scheme. The Scheme, by design, allows *iTaukei* landowners an opportunity to buy back their customary land. That is facilitated by the Government buying it off the freeholder, and then selling it or having it held over to the landowning unit interest free.

That initiative was designed to address the longstanding grievances arising from land expropriation that dates back to colonial times. It has been consistent and up until now, an emotional and heartfelt plea from some *iTaukei* communities, and the Government believes that renewing it this year is a balanced approach, both in acknowledging these historical injustices and ensuring a return on Government investment on freehold land.

I must emphasise to this House and also to the members of the public, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Buy Back Scheme from the start and when it is renewed this year, has always had a very noble intention. Secondly, it is only done between willing buyers and willing sellers. The purchase by the Government for the landowners has always been done on arm's length principle. I am aware that there are some who seek to provide an alternative for some political landscapers who are spreading assumptions, and some an outright lie that it is a Government sponsored land grab. Far from it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, freehold land, as you know, cannot be taken unless the freeholder accepts to part with his or her freehold title. In definition in law, freehold titles are indivisible, and the interests of the freehold title holder takes precedence over everyone else. Coming to the question, in 1989, the Ministry was allocated a budget of \$3.7 million for the purchase of 24 lots.

A further allocation of \$2 million was made in 1993 to continue that initiative. During the period in question, the Ministry facilitated the purchase of additional six land parcels on behalf of the original landowners or landowning unit. In 1989, I would say Munia Island in Vanuabalavu. In 1991, Tuvumaca Estate in Taveuni, Matakunea Estate and Korodrogo in Macuata. In 1992, Mua Estate in Taveuni and Wairuku Estate in Savusavu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry fully acknowledges the financial challenges that are faced by these landowning units to meet their payment obligations to Government. As part of the Buy Back Scheme for this phase this year, the Ministry is seeking to work closely with other stakeholders, including

Government agencies who are able to facilitate support through the landowning units in developing income generating projects. These partnerships aim to empower landowners economically, helping them to meet their commitments and sustainably manage the land that they are able to buy back. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we speak, there are 15 of the 24 landowning units that have some of their repayments yet to be completed. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- Since there are no supplementary questions, I intend to suspend our proceedings for the afternoon break now. However, before I do, given the hour, I will now entertain a Suspension Motion and for that purpose, complying with the Standing Orders with respect to our sitting times, I call upon the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament to move a Suspension Motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

HON. LEADER OF GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move under Standing Order 6:

That so much of Standing Order 23(1) is suspended so as to allow the House to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. today to complete the remaining items listed on today's Order Paper.

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

HON. LEADER OF GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have two Oral Questions and a Written Question for debate in Schedule 2 and three Motions on the reports as stated.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 3.51 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.25 p.m.

QUESTIONS

Update - Review of the Dairy Industry
(Question No. 93/2025)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics update Parliament on the status of the review of the dairy industry as announced during the 2023-2024 Budget Address?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for his question. As we have said at that time when the former Minister for Agriculture was here, there was a relook at the status of the dairy industry by the Ministry as part of the budget preparation for 2024-2025 and also assessment during the 2025-2026 Budget.

This is a very good question from the honourable Leader of the Opposition for two reasons. Firstly, there is a history and the honourable Leader of the Opposition knows it very well that the dairy industry has been on a decline, production has remained low, input costs remain high, farm level productivity has been declining and dairy supply continue to fall short, meeting only 20 percent to 25 percent of national liquid milk demand.

Let me just remind honourable Members of this House and honourable Leader of the Opposition that significant dairy decline started in 2012 with the restructure of the previous Rewa Dairy and government argued it did not know about its debt, but that was one issue. It was sold to Fiji Dairy Limited. The Southern Cross Food Limited, a private entity owned by CJ Patel, and as part of that agreement, the company was granted fiscal and import excise duty on full cream powdered milk, liquid milk, butter, yogurt, cheese for a 10-year period. The rationale, we can argue until the cows come home with respect to why it was done. However, the protection that was given to that company, the intention of any import substitution strategy with protection (in this case it was 32 percent duty protection) is to ensure that you raise local production. Any kind of protection for any industry is designed to raise local production and this is what happened.

Rewa Dairy was sold to this private company. This private company was given 32 percent duty protection which meant, Mr. Speaker, in layman's language, that this company had exclusive right with zero duty to import and bring milk product to Fiji, as I had highlighted, compared to those who wanted to also import. They would have had to pay 32 percent duty. On top of that, there was no price control on the items for the price of milk, butter, et cetera that they could charge as a result of the support that government was providing by protecting them. So, we did two things - erase the prices of everything on all milk products (we are talking about butter prices recently). The honourable Maharaj talked about it and then we were telling him, go and look at butter prices in New Zealand and then talk about butter prices here.

The other requirement or the other intention of the protection was that this private company, and they had said that they will set up chilling centres, promote local milk production, and therefore, they were given the protection, but none of that happened. What happened was, this company continued to enjoy, so they would bring powdered milk with zero duty, convert it into liquid milk, bring the butter slab, convert salt here, and because there was no price control, they would sell it at a price which would almost be equivalent to adding the 32 percent duty, as would be the case when others import; that is what happened. We ended up with price rises, and not increasing the production of dairy. So what we saw,

milk production in 2024 stood at \$6.4 million compared to a total demand of 70 million litres, which includes 24 million litres of liquid milk imports. Out of 1,072 dairy farmers, only 264 registered dairy farmers supply the formal market buyer Fiji Dairy Limited, while 808 are operating in an informal subsistence scale. Interest in dairy farming has been coming down due to the low returns and farm gate price. We raised these issues with the previous government about the price and the incentive that the Government had to provide so that farmers would still be interested in producing milk.

In answering the honourable Leader of the Opposition, since we came into Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have not only doubled the budgetary allocation for the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways, but we have also provided –

- additional funding to Fiji Dairy Co-operative Limited for milk cartage from farm gate to chillers;
- 18 cents per litre farm gate incentive;
- artificial breeding programmes;
- recruitment of two extension officers and one veterinary officer;
- purchase of veterinary medicine;
- farmer training; and
- infrastructure works on dairy farms.

To ensure growth in the dairy industry beyond the Central Division, we have increased the budgetary allocation for the dairy extension programme from \$300,000 in the 2022-2023 Budget to \$978,000 in the 2025-2026 Budget. The funding focused on –

- supporting small-scale farmers producing less than 50 litres per day to scale;
- expanding the Brown Swiss breed through artificial insemination;
- piloting ghee production in Bua (a first for the local industry); and
- we are also providing additional funding for lease renewal, et cetera.

Last year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for example, some of them were dairy farm leases, Government provided \$1.2 million to clear lease arrears for 218 farmers, enabling the issuance of 50 agricultural leases through the iTaukei Land Trust Board. That is the initiative that this Government has taken with respect to lease renewal.

In the current Budget, we have introduced a lease premium subsidy of \$1 million, covering 30 percent of lease renewal premium for farmers, leaseholders, and the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs the other day talked about lease renewals for the dairy sector. Hence, to entice new commercial agriculture ventures into the dairy industry, the Government will continue to offer tiered structure tax exemptions for capital investments above \$100,000.

In addition, specialised dairy machineries are also eligible for duty concessions, free fiscal and free import excise duty. This is in addition to the tax-free region, Mr. Speaker, Sir, which covers all sectors and most of the formal dairies supplying areas in the Central Division. So, just to add, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the structure, just like the sugar industry, we have had a very, very difficult downward spiral in the production of milk and in the interest of dairy farmers to continue in that industry.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister. He has talked about incentives, but the simple question was, has there been a review of the industry? He has not answered that.

My question to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister is, he talked about Southern Cross, which is involved in processing. He did not mention anything at all about how the dairy sector was affected by brucellosis and tuberculosis. Do you have the figures on how many dairy cows were culled as a result of tuberculosis and brucellosis that was prevalent in the industry from 2005? He only started in 2012; 2005, the figures are already there that brucellosis and tuberculosis is affecting the dairy sector.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think the honourable Leader of the Opposition has forgotten. As I have said very clearly, the Ministry of Agriculture reviewed the industry in terms of budgetary allocations that they wanted. He is talking about incentive, he is talking about tuberculosis. Now, that is a new question but he has forgotten, he was sitting here in this Parliament as Minister for Agriculture.

On 24th March, 2017, I moved a motion in this Parliament asking them, when they were in government, for a rehabilitation package.

HON. J. USAMATE.- He is still not answering the question.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This is the motion. Let me read the motion, and I quote from Page 1013 of the *Daily Hansard* of 24th March, 2017:

“That this Parliament agrees that in light of the struggling Dairy Industry and worsening plight of dairy farmers, an extensive rehabilitation package be implemented for the vibrancy and vitality of the Dairy Industry and dairy farmers.”

That motion was seconded by honourable Niko Nawaikula.

What did the then Minister for Agriculture said? He said, “Oh, the spider has moved from sugar to dairy.” That was his response. If we had done something in 2017, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we lost so many years of policy incentive.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Point of Order – Standing Order 45(4), “The Minister must reply to a question, unless it would be inconsistent with the public interest to do so.” The question is very specific. I assume that the honourable Deputy Prime Minister knows how to read. He says, “as announced during the 2023-2024 Budget”, what is the status of the review? That is what you have to do. It is out of order by virtue of that question. He needs to learn to answer the question. Stop the dilly-dallying and the meandering.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think that is a good try to deflect attention from the disaster that they created. That is a disaster that we have inherited.

I said very clearly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Ministry of Agriculture had reviewed the industry requirements during the two budgets, whether he means a formal review, they believed in so many consultants during their time. So, if there is anything, you get a consultant; we did not do that. But the fact of the matter is, honourable Usamate is trying to deflect. He was there and he was probably the loudest.

(Laughter)

This was a motion we moved in 2017. We recognised the difficulty that the dairy industry was facing in this country, Mr. Speaker, Sir. They quickly forgot this motion.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- The question is not on the motion.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I said that the industry was reviewed by the Ministry of Agriculture as part of our budget process. I pointed out what we did in the last two or three Budgets to ensure that the dairy industry gets back to its feet, but if anyone is to be blamed for the dairy industry, it is the honourable Leader of the Opposition and the government in which he served as Minister for Agriculture.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- If I may, under Standing Order 80 do a personal explanation, if you allow, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- No, I will not. I think he has explained the review that had been done which you had asked, honourable Leader of the Opposition, and the action. What you may need to follow up on was whether there was any action after the review was done, and for that, I find logical.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.-That is what I wanted to clarify, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER. – You may proceed.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- That motion was in 2017. The honourable Deputy Prime Minister does not know that in 2012, we had already signed a package with the New Zealand Government, costing NZ\$12 million, to do the recovery in the dairy sector, concentrating on brucellosis and tuberculosis that I have talked about, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER. - Honourable Deputy Prime Minister you may wish to clarify?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the figures do not lie. He is talking about tuberculosis. We know the industry but if you look at the production, the decline started in 2012 when they did that ill-conceived policy decision of selling Rewa Dairy, giving the 32 percent duty protection to a private company in which they had a lot of interest in. In doing so, they destroyed the industry from the volume of 9 million litres in 2012, down to 6.5 million in 2018. The only period in which it went up a little bit was 2014, and then it continued to decline, and remained around 6.5 million litres. Who is responsible for that? Not this Government! It was your government and you as Minister for Agriculture.

HON. I. B. SERUIRATU. - How many cows were slaughtered as a result of tuberculosis?

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- I will not uphold the objection by honourable Usamate for the reason I had given, that the review he was referring to was done, and only the specifics after the review was the one that was asked by the honourable Leader of the Opposition to follow on with certain qualifications, which he had elaborated on.

Code of Conduct - Public Service Vehicle Operators
(Question No. 94/2025)

HON. T.R. MATASAWALEVU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister inform Parliament on what the Ministry is doing to enforce the Code of Conduct for all public service vehicle operators?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. The enforcement of discipline and professional standards in our public service vehicle (PSV) industry remains a key concern for the Coalition Government. The Land Transport Authority (LTA) continues to take concrete steps to uphold the integrity of PSV operations across the country.

From January 2024 to August 2025, a total of 1,732 Traffic Infringement Notices (TINs) were issued, specifically under categories relating to misconduct by PSV drivers and passengers. This figure alone reflects both the scale of non-compliance and the enforcement response currently in place.

Further to that, 188 PSV drivers were formally summoned to appear for show cause hearings during the same period. These hearings serve as a mechanism to review and, where necessary, suspend or cancel driver licences for drivers who breach their obligations under their driving behaviour.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the LTA continues to work closely with its stakeholders to build a more accountable and responsive transport system. Highlighted are some several proactive initiatives led by the Road Safety Education Unit of the LTA to reinforce compliance:

(1) Defensive Driving Courses for PSV Drivers

Each year, an average of 500 PSV drivers undergo Defensive Driving Courses where the PSV Code of Conduct is a core module. Interactive sessions and group exercises are conducted to instil ethical conduct, professionalism and road safety responsibilities.

(2) Operator Engagement

The RSE Team regularly visits major bus depots and bases, engaging directly with operators and drivers to reiterate the expectations of the PSV Code of Conduct. These engagements have proven to be effective in building awareness and accountability.

(3) Media Outreach and Behavioural Change Campaigns

With support from the Accident Compensation Commission of Fiji (ACCF), under a formal agreement signed in November 2024, we have been delivering co-ordinated awareness campaigns across various platforms, including:

- (i) billboards advertisements;
- (ii) media advertisements – *Radio Fiji, Fiji TV, Mai TV* and *CFL*;
- (iii) magazine advertisements – *Teivovo, Viti Nikua, Pacific Island Magazines, The Fiji Times*;
- (iv) social media influencers to reach younger audiences (*TikTok* influencers);
- (v) print materials - posters, calendars, flyers;
- (vi) school patrol items;
- (vii) TVC productions;
- (viii) educational materials such as calendars, posters and flyers;
- (ix) outreach activities like road safety through sports; and
- (x) road safety through *Turaga ni Koro* empowerment programmes.

These are all part of a multi-channel approach to embed the principles of safety, respect and service within the PSV sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while enforcement is important, we acknowledge that lasting change requires consistent community education, cultural transformation, and strong collaboration with industry stakeholders. This is a space where we must do better and we intend to.

We are currently reviewing options to strengthen monitoring through digital surveillance, encourage public reporting of misconduct, and increase visibility of enforcement officers in high-risk areas. There is also intention to leverage the LTA-ACCF partnership to further broaden our public messaging and create lasting awareness around driver conduct and passenger safety.

The Government remains committed to lifting standards across our public transport system, not just through enforcement, but through education, collaboration and sustained engagement with our people. The Code of Conduct for PSV operators is not just a set of rules, but is a reflection of the kind of service we expect for our communities – one that is safe, respectful and reliable. Upholding that standard requires effort from all sides, including all honourable Members of the House.

I am pleading with you to, please, spread the message for safety on our roads, our vehicles, and drivers, and the overall transport in general, the Government, operators, passengers and the public. We will continue to strengthen the systems in place, improve oversight and invest in initiatives that support a safer and more professional public transport for all Fijians.

HON. T.R. MATASAWALEVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my supplementary question to the honourable Minister is, can you advise us on road safety measures and progress generally on road safety?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to what I have mentioned, the road fatalities have continued to affect our families, communities and the workforce. As we have seen recently, behind every crash statistic is a story of loss of loved ones not returning home, of breadwinners taken too soon, and of children traumatised. We cannot treat these numbers as normal, we must respond with purpose.

As far as the question goes regarding road safety, Sir, the revamping of the National Road Safety Council (NRSC) is a key commitment under our National Development Plan, and is a key initiative which we are proceeding with. The current structure is proven to be fragmented and road safety functions spread through multiple institutions, limiting the effectiveness of our national response.

In March 2025, a nationwide consultation was undertaken to get public views on road safety challenges and relevance of the NRSC in today's transport context. The feedback was clear, that there is a strong public demand for a more coordinated, responsive and proactive road safety institution. The existing road safety function has not been able to fully utilize on much needed resources, with road safety functions currently housed within the LTA, an agency whose mandate is vehicle registration and enforcement focus. This conflict in function has hindered long term strategic planning and awareness efforts.

At the same time, the Ministry of Employment is progressing to reinstate the Workplace and School Based Accident Compensation under the Ministry, making a broader Government approach to safety and care. In alignment with this direction, the Ministry is working closely to revamp the NRSC under the ACCF structure, creating a unified, adequately resourced national body solely responsible for road safety.

A draft Cabinet paper is being prepared for further internal review and circulation to relevant Ministries and agencies for consultation and endorsement. The reform entails possible ways forward, including the removal of the road safety functions from LTA in the Land Transport Act 1998 and the Accident Compensation Act 2017, to expand the functions of ACCF to include road safety advocacy, awareness and preventative programmes, effectively reinstating and modernising the NSRC under a new governance model.

It must be emphasised that this reform is not merely administrative, it is driven by the need to save lives. With road fatalities continuing to impact families, communities and our economy, a bold and coordinated approach is long overdue.

This renewed NRSC will be mandated to lead national road safety campaigns, oversee multi-agency coordination, conduct education and awareness campaigns and provide data driven policy advice to Government. It will draw from ACCF's robust administrative systems and financial governance, ensuring transparency and efficiency. This is not just a legislative task, but a national responsibility. We owe it to every Fijian family and individual affected by road tragedies to ensure that our institutions are equipped, focussed and accountable in as far as road safety is concerned.

Written Question

iTaukei Affairs (Great Council of Chiefs) (Amendment) Regulations 2024
(Question No. 95/2025)

HON. S. TUBUNA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts inform Parliament on the total cost incurred in developing and implementing the iTaukei Affairs (Great Council of Chiefs) (Amendment) Regulations 2024 since Cabinet approval in November 2024?

¹HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now submit my response.

CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT – MINISTRY OF ITAUKEI AFFAIRS 2017-2022 ANNUAL REPORTS

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

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Report on the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs 2017-2019 and 2019-2022 Annual Reports, that was tabled on 29th April, 2025.

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

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee noted that the Ministry is strategically looking at ways to address challenges. Firstly, the preservation and management of cultural registers consist of managing land and customary titles, records and reinforcing partnerships by validating *iTaukei* data for development. The Committee needs to highlight significant key findings, such as the:

- (1) registration of the Vola ni Kawa Bula (VKB) service in the Fijian diaspora;
- (2) realignment of the village boundaries;
- (3) vacant chiefly and other leadership positions;
- (4) environmental sustainability and resettlement of villages;
- (5) cultural mapping and cultural revitalisation programme;
- (6) Nadave curriculum;
- (7) leadership training; and
- (8) Levuka World Heritage Project.

¹ Editor's Note: Reply to Written Question No. 95/2025 tabled by the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts, under Standing Order 45(3), is appended as Annexure I.

The Committee then came up with seven recommendations whereby the Ministry:

- (1) must continue to extend the VKB registration process to other countries where our *iTaukei* communities are residing.
- (2) must fill in the remaining vacant chiefly positions through the established guidelines and processes.
- (3) of iTaukei Affairs work closely with relevant Ministries on the realignment of all village boundaries to be consistent so that they have access to all the services in their respective Provinces.
- (4) must prioritise and work with other Ministries and stakeholders on the resettlement of villages.
- (5) must review the Nadave Leadership curriculum to ensure that it meets the current leadership training needs.
- (6) must extend leadership training to the remaining Provinces.
- (7) of iTaukei Affairs, through the Department of Heritage and Arts, must provide funding for the restoration of all residential properties within the Levuka World Heritage Site under UNESCO.

Furthermore, the Committee knows that the Ministry has taken steps to address climate change. Importantly, it promotes sustainability and sustainable development. There are committees that have been tasked and assigned to look into these areas in all the 14 Provinces throughout Fiji.

The Ministry is also working with the Ministry of Environment on policies in terms of climate change. The Ministry has adopted the Integrated Approach for Sustainable Development, it provides policy support, the role of Government to ensure a proactive climate resilient initiatives and to achieve focus outcome on the *iTaukei* communities.

The Committee applauds the achievement of the Ministry under the period of review. The Committee looks forward to the implementation and commitment of the recommendations.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members the floor is now open for debate on the motion. I have a list of speakers with me, each speaker is allocated eight minutes to speak.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the discussion on the Consolidated Review Report of the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs Annual Reports for 2017-2019 and 2019-2022. I believe it is essential that we approach this discussion with both an appreciation for the work undertaken and a clear assessment of where improvements are needed.

The Ministry of iTaukei Affairs is fundamental to preserving our unique cultural heritage and ensuring good governance and fostering the wellbeing of the *iTaukei* people. First, let us acknowledge the commendable efforts of the Ministry. We note the continuation of the *Vola ni Kawa Bula* registration services for our *iTaukei* communities abroad, with 13,700 new registrations during this period. This is vital for connections to our diaspora.

The Ministry has also made progress in leadership and governance, completing training in seven provinces working to fill vacant chiefly positions - a significant achievement in the completion of the Cultural Mapping Programme in 2020 which meticulously documented 1,172 villages in Fiji. This is a monumental task that safeguards our traditional knowledge.

The *iTaukei* Institute of Language and Culture has also been active, conducting workshops to revitalise artifacts with a reported 90 percent success rate and ensuring our cultural practices continue to

thrive.

We also acknowledge the Ministry's efforts in planning for the resettlement of 45 climate vulnerable villages, a crucial step in adapting to the impacts of climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, A key finding on Nadave Curriculum. It is important to state the committee highlighted that the Ministry is exploring ways to improve leadership curriculum. The curriculum in Nadave needs to address the lack of leadership in villages and communities.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to combine this with the finding which addresses leadership training. The Committee noted the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs facilitated leadership training in Nadave and the trainings are designed to empower and develop leadership skills.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these findings are closely related which basically address the issue of leadership which I have alluded to mostly in our *iTaukei* communities. Leadership in our *iTaukei* communities especially villages and settlements in our rural setting is of significant importance. These challenges is not only for the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, but for the whole of Fiji and this Parliament to work out a bipartisan method to address the problems of law and order in our rural villages.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the challenge of leadership in our indigenous communities as in villages is a challenge that needs to be addressed head on. Parliament needs to look into the leadership, our leadership in rural villages and communities. There is a lack of direction in our people in villages will affect especially *iTaukei* both in rural and urban areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, addressing the Levuka World Heritage Project. I know that Levuka has been discussed on numerous occasions during this parliamentary session, but the committee noted that 22 properties have been earmarked for restoration and upgrade although 10 will be initially assisted, it is a start.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs has a vital role in safeguarding our heritage and empowering our communities. It is incumbent upon us to ensure it has resources, the legal framework and the operational capacity it needs to succeed. By acknowledging both the commendable work done and the significant challenges that remain and by working together, we can ensure that Fiji's heritage especially our Levuka World Heritage Site is preserved for all generations to come.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Standing Committee on Social Affairs for its thorough review and seven key recommendations concerning the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs. These recommendations align well with the Ministry's strategic goals of improving service delivery, strengthening traditional governance and safeguarding our cultural heritage. I now provide this august House with a summary update on what the Ministry has done, is doing and will do in relation to those seven recommendations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the extension of the Vola ni Kawa Bula (VKB) registration to overseas *iTaukei* communities, the Ministry recognises the importance of ensuring that all *iTaukei* individuals, including those residing abroad, are registered in the VKB. Following our successful registration roadshow in the United Kingdom, we are planning a similar outreach in the United States of America and Australia.

In regards to filling vacant chiefly titles, through the iTaukei Lands and Fisheries Commission (iTLFC) and the Veitarogi Vanua, the Ministry is supporting *vanua* leadership in filling chiefly positions using established customs. We are empowering the iTLFC Officers to assist *vanua* with traditional

appointment protocols, launching community awareness programmes on chiefly title importance and registration processes; and we remain committed to preserving our traditional leadership structure and ensuring cultural continuity.

On the realignment of village boundaries, the Ministry continues to work closely with relevant Government agencies to realign village boundaries in a way that ensures equitable access to essential services. Ongoing and future actions include using geospatial and demographic data to guide the boundary changes and engaging village leaders and communities through *talanoa* sessions before some survey works.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on village resettlement, the Ministry plays an active role in the National Standard Operating Procedures Committee on Relocation. In partnership with the Fijian Taskforce on Relocation and Displacement under the Climate Change Act 2021, we are implementing a nationally owned relocation framework. This includes using scientific and community-based criteria to guide re-settlement, coordinating with multiple agencies to ensure a whole-of-government approach and supporting displaced *iTaukei* communities to maintain cultural identity during re-settlement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the review of the Nadave Leadership Curriculum, the Ministry acknowledges the need to ensure that leadership training remains relevant to today's challenges. Through the Centre for Appropriate Training and Development (CATD) in Nadave and in collaboration with the iTaukei Affairs Board, we are reviewing the curriculum to align with traditional leadership principles, modern governance and community development needs and emerging leadership issues, particularly involving youth and women.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the extension of leadership training to remaining Provinces, the Ministry has successfully conducted training in eight Provinces and is now focussing on rolling it out to Lau, Kadavu, Lomaiviti, Bua, Macuata and Cakaudrove Provinces. Key highlights include –

- training which begins in the second quarter of this financial year;
- Lau and Kadavu are prioritised due to completed traditional title visitations;
- the remaining provinces are scheduled for the next financial year;
- focus is on equipping emerging leaders, especially youth and women, with governance and communication skills; and
- a robust monitoring and evaluation system will ensure continuous improvement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the restoration of Levuka World Heritage Site residential properties, Levuka has Fiji's only UNESCO World Heritage Site which holds both historical and cultural significance for our nation. The Department of Culture, Heritage and Arts which is now under the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs is actively restoring residential and public properties in Levuka. Progress include –

- (1) A Cabinet-approved review of the World Heritage Port Town of Levuka in 2024, which now guides restoration efforts;
- (2) initial restoration of 10 residential homes, three departmental buildings and four public buildings in 2024-2025, with a budgetary allocation of \$550,000;
- (3) ensure equitable cost-sharing with special attention to retirees and low-income households;
- (4) preparation of grant guidelines for heritage restoration is now underway under Cabinet review;
- (5) development of Levuka Fire Safety Strategy, Master Plan and Heritage Tourism Model;
- (6) Long-Term Plans from 2025-2029 to restore an additional 44 residential properties with a proposed \$3 million budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, I assure this august House that the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs is fully committed to implementing all the seven recommendations. We are modernising our systems, upholding our customs and ensuring that the dignity and heritage of the *iTaukei* people are preserved and strengthened for our future generations.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I join my other colleagues who have spoken before me to first acknowledge the work of the Committee in coming up with this Consolidated Review Report of the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs for the periods 2017-2019 and 2019-2022. I also wish to acknowledge the Ministry and the Government, through the Minister, for the good work that they are undertaking, as well as the further commitment made by the honourable Minister to modernise and update pending works from yesteryears, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Very briefly on the Report, I wholeheartedly support the continuation of registration in the Vola ni Kawa Bula (VKB) of the Fijian diaspora. This is something that is usually raised during the *talanoa* sessions when Ministers and especially the Head of Government, the honourable Prime Minister, travels abroad. He just mentioned this morning about having a *talanoa* session with the community in Canberra.

One of the common issues raised is the registration of the Fijian diaspora. However, I wish to raise two issues here which are becoming common and probably something that the Ministry and Government can look into. One is about the consent - the 60 percent threshold. It is becoming difficult today because of the dispersion, not only here in Fiji, but some of the islands have very minimal numbers now in the villages. A lot of our youth or young families are part of the PALM Scheme. It is becoming an issue now to get that 60 percent threshold for consent because of the numbers that are registered in the VKB. Probably, that is something that the Ministry can consider, whether there is flexibility, if that can be reviewed because when we are talking about development issues, this is one of the cause of delays, when we are not able to get the consent on time because of the difficulty in reaching out. Even here in Fiji, it is a big problem, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We do not have the numbers in Fiji that we have to rely on those abroad. This is an issue, and if it can be considered.

The other issue that I wish to raise, particularly when it comes to development and registration, is in terms of the approval process, when there is disagreement between those in the *vanua* and those in the urban areas. That is from experience. Those in the *vanua* who want to harvest sea cucumbers, et cetera, because they want rural electrification, but then there is a different opinion from the team here. When it looks at the majority, these are issues that need to be discussed, and let us come to some agreement so that things can move forward.

On village boundaries, honourable Minister, I have another suggestion - let us not only focus on the village. Most of the landowners are now moving to occupy their land, their traditional allocation. Settlements have to be formally recognised as well so that development can go to those settlements, because villages are gazetted, but not the settlements. Approvals for development in settlements still comes back to the *Turaga ni Koro* of the gazetted village, and sometimes this becomes an issue. I still remember the issue in Balekinaga in Cakaudrove, where it ended up in a fist fight and the *Turaga ni Koro* died. That is happening, honourable Minister, because most villagers have moved out of the village. Going to Seavaci, Korotasere, Nayarabale and Vanuavou, because of the infrastructure that Government is doing, they are coming out of the village to occupy their traditional land. When it is almost 10 houses, that can become a formal settlement and it needs to be recognised so that they can co-ordinate their own development, rather than referring back to the *Turaga ni Koro*, who is in the gazetted village boundary.

We have talked about environmental sustainability and resettlement of villages and climate change this morning. While we know there are villages to be relocated, I hope that the Government can continue to pursue funding from outside Government so that we can get more funding.

Lastly, on leadership training, leadership, of course, is important, but let us also look at other skills - entrepreneurial training, good governance leadership as part of the big good governance mechanism and machinery, and reviewing the curriculum is appreciated. With that, just on the short courses, it is the basic training needs analysis and design. We talked about validation, which is important because it will feed back into the system so that the training can be redesigned and meet the expectations of key stakeholders.

Once again, I thank the Committee for their Report, and that is my small contribution, which I hope can be considered by the Ministry to continue to improve the service delivery to our *iTaukei* community.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Koroilavesau for their contributions. They have articulated the recommendations very well and some of the progress that have been made in a number of areas was highlighted very well by the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs.

I must say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the point of view of the Ministry of Finance, from the point of view of the utilisation of the funding and some of the planning that the Ministry has done, it is commendable. As has been highlighted, the unqualified audit report is also an indication of how the Ministry is working. However, let me just highlight (all the honourable Members pointed that out) that we need to strengthen the *iTaukei* administration, the institutions and governance.

When we came into government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we took a decisive step in terms of the budgetary allocation and I know the honourable Leader of the Opposition talked about the resources. Between 2017 and 2022-2023 Budget, the average allocation for all those six years was about \$14 million. In the 2023-2024 Budget, we more than doubled the allocation from average of \$14 million to \$33 million in 2022-2023 Budget. We further increased it to \$39 million in the 2024-2025 Budget.

Just to highlight the 2023-2024 financial year, as I have said, there was a major increase of about \$21.5 million and there was a slight decrease in the utilisation of the budget, compared to the previous years when the budget was smaller. But that was partly due to the major projects and programmes in the 2023-2024 Budget, which the Ministry was not able to implement and undertake, such as the *iTaukei* land development and rehabilitation of the Levuka World Heritage structure.

In the 2024-2025 financial year, the total budget for the Ministry, as I have said, was \$39.4 million, comprising of about \$29.1 million for the operating expenditure and \$9.6 million for capital expenditure, which also included a number of new initiatives such as the village development programmes and strengthening and increasing the allowances for the various heads of the *mataqali*, *Turaga ni Yavusa* and *Mata ni Tikina*. It was all done partly to ensure that the administration at the local level, as has been pointed out, be strengthened.

In the current Budget (2025-2026), again, we have increased it from \$39.4 million to \$41.2 million. The significant increase in the Ministry's budget for the past three financial years is due to the incorporation of the Coalition Government's Manifesto Agreement, that is, to increase budgetary allocations for capital grants under the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, to ensure health, education and infrastructure outcomes for rural areas and the inclusion of the Department of Heritage and Arts, which was previously administered by the Ministry of Education.

Apart from those allocations directly through the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, there are a number of allocations in a number of other Ministries that is directly focused on improving our rural infrastructure. Most of the rural areas and rural maritime areas invariably includes majority of the population who are

our *iTaukei*. So, if you look at the improvement in the infrastructure, whether it is in terms of education, health, seawalls or rural roads, these are all designed to add to the infrastructure quality, to improve the quality of life for our people in the rural areas.

The significant increase in the budget for the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to enhance and support the administration, as well as undertake very, very specific projects to improve the quality of life and the support services in different sectors. As the honourable Minister highlighted, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this increase in budget has been a significant step by the Government to ensure that the support of the local administration is enhanced so that the delivery of services to people in the rural and maritime areas and beyond is significantly improved.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will now call on honourable Vanawalu, the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs, to speak in reply.

HON. I. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank all the honourable Members who have contributed positively to this debate and have taken note of all the points that have been addressed in this august House.

On that note, Sir, I support the motion before this House this afternoon.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT- FIJI DEVELOPMENT BANK 2022 AND 2023 ANNUAL REPORTS

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

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Report on the Fiji Development Bank 2022 and 2023 Annual Reports, which was tabled on 29th April, 2025.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Development Bank (FDB) in Fiji is a sole national development financial institution. Its core mandate is to support economic growth by providing financial services to sectors that are often underserved by commercial banks. These include agriculture; commerce; industry; micro, small and medium enterprises; and rural development projects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FDB plays a pivotal role in bridging credit gaps, especially for businesses and development initiatives that may not qualify for traditional bank loans. It aims to improve the socio-economic wellbeing of Fijians by financing projects aligned with the National Development Plan and broader Government priorities.

As part of our mandate to scrutinise the FDB's performance, the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs adopted a comprehensive and inclusive strategy to gather relevant information for the review of the 2022 and 2023 Annual Reports. We began with a thorough analysis of the Reports, identified key issues and formulated questions for clarification. That was followed by public hearings with FDB representatives where they gave direct responses to our concerns.

To ensure a balanced perspective, we received written submissions from stakeholders such as the Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation (FCEF) and the MSME council. These inputs were invaluable in understanding the broader impact of FDB's operations.

The Committee also conducted site visits across the Central, Western and Northern Divisions, engaging directly with loan recipients both, successful and non-successful. Those consultations provided firsthand insight into the challenges faced by Fijians in accessing and managing financial support.

Additionally, we held a roundtable discussion with Government agencies and development partners to explore collaborative solutions. While some Ministries did not attend despite the invitations, the dialogue with those who were present helped us to identify gaps and opportunities for improvement. This multi-pronged approach ensured that our findings and recommendations were grounded in both, data and live experiences, reflecting the realities of those served by the FDB.

The Committee scrutinised the Reports and it has identified pertinent issues of concern, as follows:

- FDB has a weak engagement with key Government agencies, such as agriculture, fisheries and forests.
- Only 1,000 out of the 48,000 farmers, are funded, with 90 percent being sugarcane farmers.
- Excessive timelines for loan approvals and disbursement in economic activity.
- Lending rate at 5.3 percent is not competitive.
- FDB did not respond to the 2020 and 2021 review recommendations as required.
- Report focusses on activities rather than measurable outcomes.
- Only 50 percent of the approved loans were disbursed in 2023.
- Only 37 percent of loan applications were approved.
- Despite 94 percent online applications, delays in documentation issues persist.
- \$112 million in non-performing loans, with \$11 million written off.
- Less than 5 percent of the loans are directed to their emerging sectors.

Furthermore, the Committee, in its review, identified a total of 11 key findings and issued seven strategic recommendations, aimed at strengthening the Bank's governance, operational efficiency and development impact. These findings highlighted critical areas such as delay in loan processing, high non-performing loans, limited innovation, and weak collaboration with Government Ministries.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank and acknowledge FDB for its timely and constructive response to the recommendations put forward by the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs. The Bank has demonstrated a clear commitment to reform and progress by engaging professional consultants, initiating strategic reviews, and aligning its operations with national development priorities. Its willingness to adopt a smart performance framework, enhance the financial literacy outreach and strengthen partnership with key Ministries reflects a proactive approach to addressing the challenges identified in the review. We commend FDB for its transparency and responsiveness, which are essential qualities in a development institution serving the people of Fiji.

The Committee acknowledges the efforts of FDB in addressing the challenges identified. We urge continued reforms and strategic partnership to ensure FDB becomes a more efficient, inclusive and impactful development institution. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. Each speaker is allowed eight minutes to make a presentation.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the motion on the Fiji Development Bank's Annual Reports for 2022 and 2023, and the seven recommendations from the Standing Committee. The Fiji Development Bank (FDB) was founded in 1967, which means it is around 58 years old, and it was established to uplift our people, stimulate growth, and fill the financing gap left by commercial banks.

Over the years, FDB has been doing what it has been doing, and as we have heard from the Chairperson, that it is important that we review FDB because FDB is actually struggling to fulfil its mandate. It is marked by reduced lending, bureaucratic delays and missed opportunity, so if you look at all these things and the demand people put on FDB, it needs to change its game.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the numbers speak volumes. In 2023, the lending portfolio contracted by over \$126 million, that is a 20 percent drop from the previous year. More concerning, only half of approved loans were disbursed. How can we expect development when funds do not reach those who need them?

The Committee hearings brought to light the challenges faced by these very clients - real people seeking opportunity but grappling with red tapes, extended waiting time, and exorbitant interest rate with high fees and charges which are not clearly disclosed to the clients. Such a disconnect not only stifles economic activity, but erodes confidence in an institution that should be enabling inclusive growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, of 48,000 farmers, only about 1,000 received FDB support. That means, what happens to 47,000 farmers? Recently, the Government released its Non-Sugar Agriculture Sector Policy 2025-2035. This is a concern, Sir.

Other key sectors, such as fishermen and *yaqona* cultivators, all remain under-supported, partly due to poor coordination with Ministries. Those 1,000 who received FDB support are mostly sugarcane growers. What happens due to poor coordination with Ministries? They are actually missing the real opportunities for partnerships and maximising development impact through bankable projects. They can work with Ministries to develop such projects.

Loan approval takes months and we were really saddened to hear in Seaqqa, people were waiting for more than a few months, it was actually years they have been waiting for FDB to approve their loan. This raises a question about whether this is true development financing or actually debt entrapment. The Bank made a modest profit of \$3.82 million in 2023, but its subsidiary which is FDB Nominees Private Limited, holds minimal assets, missing a chance to leverage capital and reducing reliance on Government guarantees.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also want to highlight that staff benefit seems disconnected from performance, which is concerning when borrowers struggle with operational inefficiencies. It really seems that interest rate and fees and charges are pegged to generate enough revenue that can sustain or support staff and the operations of FDB. That is why we see that the fees and charges are going up and up. We also came to know that FDB employs two staff to look after staff loans, which is of concern, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee also identified weaknesses in FDB's governance and accountability. Annual Reports focussed more on activities than outcomes, with little alignment to national development goals, pointing to the need for more robust performance and evaluation framework.

More pressing still is the issue of non-performing loans. For priority or focus sectors, NPL rate stands at 26.7 percent, while for non-focus sectors such as construction and real estate, the non-performing rate is at a staggering 73.3 percent. In dollar terms, \$112 million remain unrecovered, with an additional \$11 million written off. Such figures demand rigorous scrutiny by the Board.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee recommended a comprehensive independent review of the FDB's operation - one that examines financial health, governance, lending practices, human resource management, and critically, the Bank's alignment with National Development Plan priorities. This review must be conducted externally and objectively, to chart a credible path forward for the Bank.

It must be noted that the last review of FDB was done in 2004, which is 20 years ago, by Commonwealth Bank of Australia. Mr. Speaker, Sir, rather than allowing FDB to review itself, it is extremely crucial that the review should be conducted externally, in consultation with all the clients, with various Ministries, particularly the Ministry of Finance, to understand the national development priorities, and that is how FDB should be organised.

Fiji deserves a development bank that works in full partnership with key ministries and stakeholders, supports all strategic sectors in our development agenda, aligns remuneration and benefits to institutional and development performance, streamlines its loan processes to better serve our people and adopts robust system to measure and report on social and economic outcomes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would just like to highlight that over the years, FDB has been serving the people, but we want FDB to become better so that it aligns with the technological development that is taking place.

I also must highlight that when you pick up the FDB Report, the way the Report is written - you go through the pages, it is very glossy and voluminous, it talks about how the customers have increased from 4,000 to 8,000, but they do not acknowledge the Government's contribution in increasing the customer base. It was the Government's funding that was given to FDB to help women entrepreneurs and other small businesses; all that helped to increase the clients. However, my question is, if you have staff there, if you have a management team, then why are they not able to come up with creative ways of increasing the customer base on their own accord? That is what I am questioning. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA. - Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the motion before this august House on the Consolidated Review Report on the Fiji Development Bank Annual Report for the period 2022 to 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the recommendations by the Standing Committee of Economic Affairs, and I thank the Committee and all its Members for conducting a thorough review of the Report, as well as the Bank as an institution.

The Fiji Development Bank (FDB), since its inception in 1967, is the country's sole national development financial institution that plays an important role in Fiji's economic growth by providing financial support to key sectors such as agriculture, commerce and industry.

By looking at the Report, as well as the recommendations, despite achieving a net profit of \$3.8 million in 2023, it was noted that the FDB's market share declined from 7.35 percent to 5.5 percent. This may be due to high interest rates, which are not competitive compared to other commercial banks either because they have high cost of borrowing. However, I support the recommendation for a comprehensive independent view of the Bank to assess its structure, governance and operational effectiveness, considering its current performance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a need for the Bank to review its policies, products and lending conditions, including streamlining loan processing and disbursement timelines to improve efficiency and accessibility, something that was alluded to earlier by the previous speaker.

It was also supported by the Bank, approving loans amounting to \$93 million in 2023, but only disbursed around 50 percent which was around \$46.1 million. Similarly, loan applications worth \$175.54 million was received in 2023, but only 1,965 applications were approved, amounting to \$59.3 million, an approval rate of just 37 percent. Another area of concern is the Bank's inability to recover non-performing loans of \$112 million, with \$11 million written off as bad debts during the review period.

The Standing Committee's recommendation is for the Bank to undergo compulsory financial literacy, and business training is fully supported to assist its customers in dealing with all its finances, as well as keeping accounts up to-date.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have full confidence that under the leadership of the new Chief Executive Officer, Mr. Filimoni Waqabaca, the Bank will undergo some reviews and reforms to improve its efficiency, as well as creation of new loan policies and products to improve its loan portfolio, as well as its services. It is very encouraging to note that the Bank will now extend its services to housing loans, which will further diversify its portfolio.

I thank the CEO as well as the management and staff of FDB for providing better financial services, especially for those who need development assistance. I fully support the motion before the House.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a critical review of the Consolidated Review Report of the Fiji Development Bank 2022-2023 Annual Report reveals that Fiji Development Bank is significantly falling short of its core objective, as a nation's sole development financial institution. While the Report acknowledges some challenges and offers recommendations, it lacks the necessary urgency and concrete alternative solution to truly realign FDB with its development mandate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FDB's fundamental purpose – established in 1967 – is to play a pivotal role in Fiji's economic growth by providing financial support to key sectors, such as agriculture, commerce and industry. Thereby, providing a socio economic wellbeing of Fijians and bridging the credit gaps for projects that commercial banks may not finance. Furthermore, its operations should align with the Government's development agenda and contribute to Sustainable Development Goals, particularly, poverty reduction, gender equality and decent work.

The Report's findings illustrate the disconnect from these objectives, failing to drive economic growth and bridge credit gaps. Sir, the FDB's market share has declined from 7.35 percent to 5.5 percent, indicating that the private sector prefers other commercial banks. This is a clear failure to competitively bridge credit gaps, and suggest that FDB is losing its relevance as the primary development finance provider. The high interest rates offered by FDB is uncompetitive, making credit expensive and hindering its accessibility, especially for vulnerable sectors it is meant to serve. This directly contradicts its role in supporting economic growth by providing affordable finance.

Only 50 percent of approved loan – \$46.1 million out of \$93.4 million – were actually displaced in 2023. This massive gap means a significant portion of intended financial support is not reaching the ground, severely limiting its impact on economic activity and development. With regards to insufficient support for key sectors and socio economic wellbeing, while agriculture has the largest loan portfolio, the FDB shows lack of specific attention to other natural resource sectors like fisheries and forestry. The overwhelming focus on sugarcane farmers – 90 percent of the 1,000 farmers funded – demonstrate a narrow, rather than comprehensive approach to the agriculture development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, excessively long loan processing and displacement timelines imposes a significant burden on clients and delay critical project implementation, directly undermining efforts to improve socio economic and wellbeing. The fact that \$112 million in non-performing loans could not be

recovered with \$11 million written off, raises serious concerns about the viability assessment of projects, or lack of adequate post disbursement support for clients. This impacts the Bank's financial health and its ability to recycle funds for new development.

Operational insufficiency and lack of strategic alignment, the FDB has not undergone a significant independent review to modernise its operations, leading to a failure to improve service delivery and support the Government's development agenda effectively. The absence of clear performance target makes it difficult to assess FDB's true impact and accountability. Without this, it is impossible to confirm if it is truly aligning with the national development priorities. Less than 5 percent of the loan portfolios are directed towards new and emerging sectors, such as green and climate resilient projects, creative industries, logistics and supplies and service. This indicates a severe lack of foresight and alignment with future economic diversification and sustainable development needs. Staff cost accounts for over 70 percent of the total operating expenses, highlighting a significant internal insufficiency that contributes to the higher lending rate and reduced capacity to deliver its mandate.

Mr. Speaker, while the Report recommends a step in the right direction, they are often too general and lack transformative power needed to address the deep rooted issues. Here are some more robust and alternative recommendations:

- (1) Instead of just comprehensive independent review, Recommendation 5.2 – mandate an immediate independent and forensic operational and financial audit of FDB especially targeting cost insufficiencies especially staff cost, low processing bottle neck and the reason behind the declining market share and uncompetitive interest rate. This audit must deliver actionable, time bonded solution and performance benchmark for the management accountability.
- (2) Instead of merely adapting smart targets, Recommendation 5.3, implement a robust public and performance based framework with specific quantifiable targets for reducing loan processing time by 50 percent within 12 months, achieving an 85 percent loan disbursement rate for approved loan and increase in lending to new and emerging green climate resilient sectors to at least 15 percent of the portfolio within three years. This target must be directly linked to performance incentives and accountability of FDB management and staff.
- (3) Regarding the streamlining policies and lending condition - Recommendation 5.4, and using the social media platform for education - Recommendation 5.5 launch a comprehensive digital transformation initiative that fully automates the streamlines and entire loan life cycle from application to disbursement and repayment. This must be complemented by proactive direct outreach programmes in rural and remote areas using mobile banking units and dedicated community liaison officers to provide hands-on financial literacy, application support and guidance, ensuring no segment of the population is left behind due to digital divides.
- (4) For compulsory financing literacy and business training for new recipients, Recommendation 5.6 - establish a mandatory ongoing mentorship and a tailored business advisory programme for all FDB loan recipients, not just new ones, with a particular focus on assisting clients struggling with repayments or business management. This programme should leverage successful local entrepreneurs as mentors and integrate real time monetary and clearly warning systems to provide timely support to at risk business thereby improving the loan recovery rates and fostering sustainable growth.
- (5) To strengthen the strategic and holding framework, the Government ministry - Recommendation 5.7 – the Government must mandate the formation of inter-ministerial

taskforce co-chaired by high level representatives of FDB, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry and MSMEs through the Ministry of Trade.

This Taskforce must empower, with the dedicated budgetary allocation for joint project identification, core-financing and implementation with specific KPIs for generating bankable projects and ensuring their successful execution. This ensures active participation and accountability across all relevant government agencies, to truly align FDB's effort with the national development priority.

In conclusion Mr. Speaker, for the Fiji Development Bank to truly fulfil its role as the engine of national development and bridging the credit gap for the socio-economic wellbeing of Fijians, it requires more than just minor adjustments. It needs radical overhaul of the operational efficiency, a competitive re-evaluation of its financial products and an aggressive government mandate, strategic shift towards a proactive engagement and targeted support for Fiji's key and emerging sectors. Without these fundamental changes, the FDB risks becoming increasingly irrelevant in driving the nation's economic progress.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Committee and the Chairperson for the Report. I have heard very carefully the presentations from honourable Kumar and honourable Maharaj, apart from the big generalisations on a number of areas. They probably are not focusing on some of the other changes that we have made over the last two and a half years in terms of improving the overall environment, overall climate, enabling legislations to ensure that we support the development of micro, small medium enterprises. There are a number of other programmes that we have put in, in different ministries, including the TELS programme.

The market today is much more diversified and you cannot just focus on FDB stand alone and say, "yes, we are missing the point with respect to national development." This Report is about 2022-2023 and we know we used to raise a number of issues about FDB when we were in Opposition. Let me, instead of going into the Report itself, which has already been highlighted, the recommendations have been discussed, let me just give you a current update.

The agriculture sector remains the Bank's key focus area which honourable Members raised concerns. The FDB still holds the highest share in the agriculture portfolio at 34.7 percent and continues to dominate the sugar portfolio at 83 percent. That was in financial year 2023. It recorded an audited profit of \$5.6 million in the 2024 financial year, an increase of 46 percent from the previous year. This, in our view, is attributed to prudent cost management and a decline in the borrowing expense by \$2.8 million, which is a 38 percent decline. The honourable Kumar referred to the non-performing loan portfolio. In fact, the non-performing loan portfolio declined to around 18 percent in the financial year 2024 from 22 percent to 24 percent at the end of financial year 2022. So, in fact in the last two years, the non-performing loan portfolio declined to 18 percent.

Allowance for credit impairment also reduced by \$11.72 million as risk of closure on certain accounts have been mitigated during the year. Total customer base increased to 9,711 customers in the financial year 2024, from 8,526 customers in the financial year 2022. The bank successfully disbursed a substantial sum of \$91.26 million to customers against the annual target of \$80 million. This is the current update.

The Bank has recently undertaken a comprehensive review, with the assistance of KPMG, to look at its structure and operational effectiveness. This review includes a strategic plan review with a focus on aligning FDB's Strategic Plan 2024-2028 with the Fiji National Development Plan. Changes to the structure at management level has also been made to ensure faster decision making and to focus more on strategic responsibilities. So, some of the points that honourable Kumar and honourable Maharaj are

talking about for 2022 and what happened before, we are now addressing this through this comprehensive review that has been undertaken already.

Changes to the structure at management level has also been made to ensure faster decision making and to focus more on strategic level responsibilities, and the Bank is determined to deliver services more efficiently by providing rapid services, streamlining its loan products and associated support security, especially to the women, the youth and its rural customers, diversify its income base to supplement the interest income, which is important for a Bank. If you just rely entirely on agriculture alone, you cannot run a sustainable bank. So they have to diversify their income base to supplement the interest income.

Introduce new products such as housing loan, leasing and providing equity to those who lack required capital, examine and reduce operational costs, including employee costs and decentralize most of its services to the branches for efficient services to their customers. A robust smart based performance framework has been developed including strengthening specific KPIs for loan turnaround time. Portfolio quality sector performance. The revised framework now will also incorporate tracking of economic impact indicators such as employment generation, business growth and sustainability outcomes.

Performance framework presently is based on four thematic areas - financial, customer, internal business processes and employee engagement. Each thematic area has its own set of objectives, specific KPIs which include operational costs, loan turnaround time, portfolio quality and rural sector performance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all these work has already begun. Some of it has already been done. The new board and new CEO are working very hard. In fact, in the last six months, I have observed a number of changes that the bank has made. The bank is actively engaged with the other ministries - Ministry of Trade and Co-operatives, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of iTaukei Affairs under the various provincial companies and working directly with the Ministry of Finance through the FDB Loan for Women Entrepreneurs.

All these efforts, Mr. Speaker, Sir, these reviews and innovations have been initiated and I am very confident that the new board, the chairman and the new CEO are doing what they feel was not done where the Bank was lacking in terms of making sure that it remained focused on addressing the development needs of not only the agricultural sector, but across a diversified portfolio.

As I have said earlier, these innovations, reviews and these changes in the structure of the Bank including the management and its policies is all designed to ensure that the Bank not only remains relevant, but also remains sustainable as a banking institution because that is what is also very, very important and critical for it to play an important role in Fiji's development particularly in the rural and agricultural sector.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I noted some of the comments that have been raised by the honourable Members and one of those is that FDB is now struggling to meet its mandate. From what we have seen in the reports that we have scrutinised, the business model is not working. I think there needs to be some sort of review that is to be undertaken. In our recommendation, we are recommending a review to be undertaken on FDB.

Also, the other issue is on agriculture, not serving the people that it is supposed to be serving. The low number of farmers, when we went around the country, the farmers are calling out for more appropriate products in order to meet the demands. Of course, there are also a lot of issues with regards to mentorship and financial literacy and training. There is already one project in the Northern Division which is operating very successfully and we think that that project has to be emulated in other parts of the country.

to mentorship and financial literacy and training. There is already one project in the Northern Division which is operating very successfully and we think that that project has to be emulated in other parts of the country.

Mr. Speaker, what we saw was weak engagement with other Government Ministries. I think this is an issue that needs not to be strengthened, particularly when we are giving out so much grant to people in rural areas and this could be diverted to the bank so we can get more outcome in terms of what they can do. The model that has been done by the iTaukei Affairs Board with regards to land development with *iTaukei* where the fund has now been given to Merchant Bank, those are the products we need to be looking at. Instead of just a \$10 million portfolio, they are increasing it to \$60 million. It shows that targeted Government grant can significantly earn quite more in terms of achieving the development agenda that we are trying to enforce.

Honourable Maharaj has raised some issues with regards to the review and I think those issues will be covered by the review that is being undertaken. As a committee, we want to see that policies are being implemented, and when we raised this report here in Parliament, FDB has taken the cue from what we had raised here and they have undertaken another review. So in the papers the following week, that was highlighted by the media - that FDB is undertaking the review. That shows that our work as Parliamentarians is quite effective because we are telling them what needs to be done in order to achieve the development agenda of Government.

The new management has undertaken quite a lot of innovative products. We note the innovative housing products with Public Rental Board. Those are the sort of things that needs to be undertaken, so I would like to thank the new CEO for coming up with those innovative solutions to address the development agenda of Government.

I would like to thank all those honourable Members who have commented on the Report, and I do support the motion before the House.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed.

CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT – AUDIT REPORT OF PROVINCIAL COUNCILS VOLUME 4-VOLUME 6

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Audit Report on the Audit Report of Provincial Councils Volume 4-Volume 6, which was tabled on 1st May, 2025.

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- Mr. Speaker, I second the motion.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, the honourable the Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; the Standing Committee on Public Accounts is mandated under Standing Orders 109(2)(b) and 110(1)(c) to oversee the stewardship and sustainable management of the country's public finances.

In line with this mandate, the Committee has carefully examined the Report on Provincial Councils to assess compliance, financial accountability and governance practices. In this instance, we looked at around 90 Financial Statements for 14 Provincial Councils from 2011 to 2028, and focussed more of our attention to 2013 and 2015 – 42 accounts, as most of the issues were the same.

Mr. Speaker, the Standing Committee on Public Accounts identified and made 23 findings, after visiting and carrying out interviews and investigations across all the 14 Provincial Councils. I wish to highlight four issues out of the 23, as follows:

- (1) The timeliness of the reports compared to the regulated timeframe. Some, or most, are delayed by over seven years.
- (2) Poor quality of Financial Statements. The result is, all the 90 Financial Statements for the 14 Provisional Councils were issued with qualified opinion, and the worst level opinion, which is the disclaimer of opinion.
In the Auditor-General's Report this was attributed to matters such as limitation of scope, non-compliance of disclosures, requirements and the nature of transactions.
- (3) The Committee also found laxity and capacity issues with Provincial Councils, as well as the iTaukei Affairs Board. It is persistent across all the Provincial Councils and goes back to year 2000.

This disclaimer of opinion and lateness of providing Financial Statements is becoming a norm to the Provincial Councils. There is no urgency or responsibility for Provincial Councils and iTaukei Affairs Board, staff, supervisors, management board, the CEO and even the Minister himself to try and update the accounts.

- (4) The lack of proper and updated records relating to transactions with their provincial companies. Provincial Councils have provincial companies. The Committee noted significant weaknesses in recording, record keeping and documentation of financial transactions between them. In one instance, we found one provincial company taking legal action over its Provincial Council.

We have six recommendations, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as follows:

- (1) Due to the weaknesses that existed from 2000 until todote, with disclaimer of opinion, we are recommending that:

The Government, with budgetary allocation, engage external accounting firm to work on and complete the iTaukei Affairs Board's Accounts, as well as the Provincial Councils. We saw that even the Provincial Council's accounts up to 2018, which we are looking at, the iTaukei Affairs Board's account is up to 2008.
- (2) The Government, with budgetary allocation, engage an accounting firm to work and complete iTaukei Affairs Board's Accounts and update it to this year (2025).
- (3) A special and performance audit to be carried out on iTaukei Affairs Board, that is responsible for these provincial companies, and that is in accordance with sections 12(1) and (13(1) of the Audit Act 2025.

- (4) A special audit should also cover the sale transactions of Yasana Holdings Limited, an investment company for all the Provinces, including Rotuma, which we could not find in the accounts of all the provincial companies. We believe that the special and performance audit will assist iTaukei Affairs Board and Provincial Councils, going forward, because we are aware that there is a \$4 million debt to Government because of that transaction, which the iTaukei Affairs Board is finding it difficult to pay.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I have other recommendations that are there in the Report. Hopefully, with those recommendations, there will be improvement in the operations of all the provincial companies, as well as the iTaukei Affairs Board.

I commend this Report to the House and look forward to a meaningful and constructive debate, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now open the floor for debate on the motion. I have a list of four speakers with me. Each of the speakers will have eight minutes for their delivery.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the Consolidated Review Report on the Audit Report for Provincial Councils. Our Committee came up with several findings and recommendations, and I will be speaking on a few.

One of the findings of the Committee is that the Provincial Councils and iTaukei Affairs Board are not working closely with other Government Departments for the improvement or development in their respective Provinces. That shows poor coordination.

One of the key responsibilities of Provincial Councils is to ensure that improvement and development work is carried out in areas where there is a need, so that people in the Province are not left behind. The Province will only improve and address issues in areas such as education, health, housing and other areas, if the Provincial Councils and iTaukei Affairs Board work closely with Government Departments.

To counter the problems such as school dropouts, Provincial Councils and iTaukei Affairs Board should work closely with the Ministry of Education, and come up with innovative initiatives. Provincial Councils should ensure that no child in their Province is left behind. All children deserve quality education. If the issues are not addressed, we will see an increase in youth committing crimes. Provincial Councils, with Government Departments, should come up with innovative strategies of fixing problems.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other finding of the Committee is an urgent need for capacity building of Provincial Councils' staff. Provincial Councils can only progress, if staff are well trained and competent. The Committee found that Treasurers and accounting personnel at Provincial Council Offices need urgent training so that they are able to carry out their delegated duties effectively.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, capacity building is very important for enhancing skills, improving organisational performance and fostering resilience, enabling individuals and Provincial Councils to adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing environment. Capacity building will help equip Provincial Council staff with the necessary skills and knowledge to perform their task effectively, which will lead to improved performance and productivity as employees become more proficient in their role.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Report also states that internal audit processes and practices carried out at Provincial Council level is very poor. As an internal audit function, it is very important for Provincial Councils to ensure effective risk management, compliance, operational efficiency and overall

governance. Internal audits will help identify and assess risk within Provincial Councils.

An internal audit function ensures compliance by regularly reviewing practices and identifying areas where Provincial Councils may fall short, thus avoiding potential legal issues and penalties. An internal audit function plays a crucial role in detecting and preventing fraud. By effective implementation of robust internal controls and conducting regular audits, Provincial Councils can safeguard their assets and maintain integrity.

I have also noted in the Report that there is a need to address connectivity issues in remote Provincial Councils, such as Kadavu, Naitasiri, Bua and Lomaiviti. Connectivity is very important in order to enhance communication, enabling access to information and improving the overall performance of Provincial Councils. Connectivity plays a significant role in addressing the digital divide, ensuring that Provincial Councils in rural areas have access to the same resources and opportunities as those in the urban centres. This is important for promoting equality and inclusivity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee's findings reveal that neither iTaukei Affairs Board nor Provincial Councils' accounts are updated. The iTaukei Affairs Board should be leading the Provincial Councils, however, their accounts are delayed more than the Provincial Councils. I urge the Ministry responsible to look into this urgently.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Provincial Councils need support and guidance from the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs to get out of the problems which I have just highlighted. I support the recommendations of the Committee.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion, not just as a matter of financial oversight, but as a matter of public trust and the integrity of governance in our nation. Let me first commend the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs, the leadership and Officials of the Ministry, and the Standing Committee on Public Accounts for their courageous and determined efforts to restore order, discipline and transparency to a space that has been left in serious disrepair.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the revelations handed over by the Auditor-General to this Parliament were nothing short of alarming. For all 42 Financial Statements submitted by the 14 Provincial Councils to receive a disclaimer of opinion, without exception, should deeply trouble every Member of this august House. It meant that no one could verify how public money was used, or if it was used properly at all. It was a symptom of a deeper erosion of transparency, of ethical conduct, and of public service accountability.

According to the Fiji system of governance, the iTaukei Affairs Board, under national jurisdiction, has the statutory responsibility for overseeing the financial and administrative operations of the 14 Provincial Councils. The Public Accounts Committee's Volumes 4-6 Audit Reports show that over 42 Financial Statements all received disclaimer of opinion, reflecting systemic failures in record-keeping, control and documentation. The audit backlog, ranging from seven years to nine years, was enabled by successive national governments not enforcing the legislated deadline of 1st April for submission of accounts to the Auditor-General.

The absence of internal audit committees, ineffective policies and failures in enforcing corrective actions reflect negligence at the Ministry, under prior executive leadership. This is not to trivialise, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the culpability of Provincial Councils' officers and leaders, who allowed financial bottlenecks, poor records and mismanagement to persist. However, real accountability demands we also hold the oversight institutions and past leadership responsible for those failures. It would be fair to demand answers from those previous administrations as to:

- Why statutory oversight deadlines were ignored for nearly a decade?
- Why were there no active mechanisms such as site audits, regular reporting lines and performance ceilings to detect chronic non-compliance early?

Only by addressing both tiers, not just blaming Provinces, can we ensure a system that holds every level accountable.

The Coalition Government acted decisively, not because it was easy, but because it was necessary. The establishment of the Provincial Finance Taskforce, the push to clear audit backlogs, the forensic reviews into past investments, and the reforms to stop conflicts of interest, all reflect a deeper commitment to rebuild institutions that serve the people, not the interests of a few.

The reforms undertaken by the Ministry, under the present Minister's leadership, are laying the groundwork for something more valuable than clean audits. They are laying the foundation for a culture of integrity - a culture where –

- the gatekeepers are trained;
- decision-makers no longer approve their own spending;
- records are kept in real time; and
- Parliament can exercise its oversight role meaningfully.

I also wish to commend the Public Accounts Committee for its vigilance. It did not settle for rubber stamps or vague assurances - it listened, travelled, reviewed and called for change.

I am sure that we will agree that the road to recovery is not yet complete, but the path we are on is the right one - one marked by transparency, responsibility, and a renewed understanding that public office is a public trust.

We must never again tolerate environments where accountability is absent, where financial statements gather dust for nearly a decade, and where public funds become blurred with personal or political interests.

Let us, therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, recommit ourselves to –

- strengthening our independent institutions;
- funding systems that support transparency, not just in Suva, but across the islands and Provinces;
- ensuring that no official, no matter how senior, is beyond scrutiny.

Public money belongs to the people and when it is misused or left unaccounted for, it is not only a financial failure, it is a betrayal of the people's trust.

The work of the honourable Minister, the iTaukei Affairs Board and the Public Accounts Committee should remind us that governance is not simply the act of administering programmes or balancing books, it is the discipline of service, the willingness to be held to account, the courage to confront failure - not to sweep it under the rug but to correct it with humility and resolve.

As we move forward, let these reforms become the standard - not exception. Let the words never again guide every institution entrusted with the public resources because good governance is not a luxury, it is a bedrock of a just, stable and confident democracy. With that I commend the motion, Sir.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a Member of the Public Accounts Committee, I must express our profound disappointment and serious concern regarding the persistent and persuasive financial accountability issues highlighted in this Consolidated Review Report of Provincial Councils, Volumes 4 to 6, covering 2011 till 2018. The findings are not only alarming but indicate a systemic failure that demands immediate and decisive action.

Mr. Speaker, the problem has been the mindset of the people running the organisation from the day of inception. No use naming the people but rather people who were appointed to run the organisation basically treated the provincial council as privately owned local banks, giving out loans to the public without any recovery or security in place for recovery. Most of the loans given through the provincial council is with the Ministry of Finance waiting to be written off. We have been informed reliably that it amounts to millions of dollars. It is unfortunate that the very organisation that was supposed to oversee the provincial council failed to perform itself to ensure that provincial councils are performing the way they were supposed to, that agency is iTaukei Affairs Board.

Mr. Speaker, imagine iTaukei Affairs Board did their own audit in 2008. The responsibility of the provincial council is to look after the development of the province, improve infrastructure, improve the socio-economic status of the *iTaukei* community.

Mr. Speaker, projects are discussed at the village meeting, passed on to the Tikina Council followed by Provincial Council then iTaukei Affairs Board and through iTaukei Affairs Board it goes to the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs to be implemented. So, the million dollar question to us is why have villagers started going to the Ministry of Rural Development rather than following the process already in place through the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs with regards to provincial development. This clearly shows that there are links missing in between. It clearly shows something is wrong somewhere which needs to be improved.

Performance of the Roko Tui - Roko Tuis need to be transferred and some provincial councils need more qualified Roko Tuis who can perform with a better service delivery within the province. We need properly trained Roko Tuis as they have the same function as CEOs of any organisation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the most important one was provincial companies. These companies were formed to financially help the councils meet financial demands to develop the province. There seems to be a huge disconnect between the provincial council and provincial companies. Most of these companies were funded through provincial councils, providing the funding as advanced equity or loan.

Provincial companies do not even pay a dividend to the provincial council that can be used to develop the province. When the Public Accounts Committee was going around, we realized some companies were withholding companies, some limited liability companies, some operating as co-operatives, some as shareholders who were directly members of the *vanua* and one of the provincial councils was operating like a commercial company. The most interesting one was that the owners or directors were three individuals. So, the provincial council had no say in that particular company. How and when this money was given to the provincial company, there seems to be no record and now when the council asks for the accounts or dividends, they are informed that provincial companies are independent and governed by the Companies Act and not responsible to report to the council, though the councils had invested money in these companies.

When these companies needed money or when they need money, they run to the provincial council for funding but when it is the other way round or time to pay a dividend, the council is told they have nothing to do with the companies. What an irony! Some of the provincial councils transferred all their fixed assets to the provincial companies only to realise a few years later that the company is trying

to move the council office out of their office space since the building now belongs to the company where the office exists. The reason given was that they can get more rent if the office space is rented to someone else.

Mr. Speaker, I urge with the passing of the Audit Act, the honourable Minister responsible for iTaukei Affairs to call for either a performance or special investigation in all provincial companies so that the Public Accounts Committee can further scrutinise issues and provide solutions that exist between provincial councils and provincial companies.

The other issue is the *solu ni yasana*. We were informed that the *solu ni yasana* was stopped as it was putting additional burden on the villagers, but since the Government brought in this policy to stop *solu ni yasana*, provincial councils are now collecting *solu* under the new scheme of *solu ni vanua*. Mr. Speaker, the very reason this policy was made is to reduce the financial burden, not to collect it under a different title. Provincial Councils have no internal auditors, no SOPs, no policies and no guidelines. If we do not have these, one can only wonder how much abuse would there be without any proper structure.

All provincial councils need to come up with their own 20-year provincial development plan and five-year strategic plan that should be the guiding document. All councils need to go away from investing in shares as money is made by buying the shares when the rate is low and selling when the shares market is high. The current investment structure is not making money for the provincial companies nor the provincial councils. The interest paid to the shares held by provincial companies or provincial councils is earning them just a couple of thousands which is an insignificant amount when we look at the amount needed to develop the province.

While investing in buying shares saw a very healthy balance sheet, it is just a value on paper and not cash at hand and to develop a province we do not need value on paper, we need cash at hand. I do understand that there have been some studies done, but I should warn the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, it has been done by those who have failed to successfully run their own councils and are now recommending how other provincial councils should be reformed and restructured.

The issues presented in this Report are not new, they are entrenched problems that have been allowed to fester far too long. The continued disclaimer of opinion and the seven-year backlog are the testament of chronic neglect and in some cases potential gross mismanagement. We cannot afford to have this institution vital for the welfare of our iTaukei citizens operating without proper financial accountability. It is time for a concerted high-level intervention with tangible deadlines and consequence for non-compliance. The citizens of Fiji deserve nothing less than a transparency and accountability of their provincial councils and provincial companies and the iTaukei Affairs Board.

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; I wish to contribute to the debate related to the Consolidated Review Audit Report for Provincial Councils for the periods 2011 to 2018, and I am privileged to be a Member of the Standing Committee of Public Accounts that have put together the Report that is tabled before the House.

At the outset, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to state that we visited all the 14 provincial council offices, talked to the Roko Tuis, chairmen of the provincial councils, treasurers and senior staff as well as, we had a series of meetings with the executives of the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs in trying to dissect and verify the reasons for the delay in submitting the audited financial report. As you know, this Report is from 2011 to 2018.

On a positive note, Mr. Speaker Sir, we had some time together with the current senior executives of the Ministry. We talked to them and thrashed all the issues that were highlighted in the Report. As I have said, the positive note is that they have indicated that they are working very hard to try and update their accounts before the end of this financial year. So, that is a positive note with the current management that we have with the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and Provincial Councils.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I am trying to find some relevancy or something pertinent in the delay in the submission of this Report. I then remembered that a similar report was tabled in this House for the Office of the Attorney-General for the delay in submitting annual reports from 2014 and it was later submitted in the current Parliament. With this, I tend to look back at those who were in leadership in those two institutions during the time of the Report. That is a question that we need to answer. Why were they, was it a deliberate attempt or the no care attitude in submitting the report which has now been tabled in the House today?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as my colleagues have mentioned, at the outset, the Office of the Auditor-General issued a disclaimer of opinion to all the 14 Provincial Councils, which means that sufficient audit evidence was unable to be obtained by the Office of the Auditor-General on which to base the audit opinion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is based on several factors and to name a few, apart from some of the issues that have been named by honourable Members who have already spoken on the same issue:

- (1) The limitation of scope – the audit was not provided with sufficient appropriate supporting documents to substantiate the balances reported in the financial statements. There are underlying factors that contribute to this, which includes lack of capacity within the accounting cadre at the various provincial offices that understand the importance of keeping source documents.
- (2) Most provincial offices do not have proper registry or even secure filing cabinets to store accountable documents.
- (3) Most transactions are handled manually, which have an impact during audits if these documents went missing.
- (4) Significant breakdown in internal controls, for example, the nature of transactions inherent in the collection of provincial rates.

The Committee believes this is also a leadership issue at that time. Those responsible to take the lead role in guiding the administration of provincial councils were not up to par with the dynamics required in that field.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, lastly, on the timeliness of financial reporting, this is another area that needs significant improvements from the Provincial Councils, iTaukei Affairs Board and the Ministry. I fully support the Committee's recommendations before the House.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL: Mr. Speaker, Sir, I noted the comments by the honourable Members in the debate and importantly, I would like to provide an update on the current status. I am glad that provincial councils with the current iTaukei Affairs Board finance team and the current board are working tirelessly to update the accounts and improve its quality which includes improving all the processes and procedures and putting in place accounting systems. Their aim is to update the 2022 accounts, that is, from 2019 to 2022 by July 2025, which was last month. We will have to check on that and the 2024

accounts by December 2025.

The Public Accounts Committee is encouraging them or stressing that they complete everything, including resolving all the issues by the next financial year. When I say resolving issues, there will be some write-offs, some adjustments to account, some probably the totality would be over \$1 million. We are aware that some Cabinet Ministers are members of the iTaukei Affairs Board, they are aware of the issues and working towards most of those recommendations.

I wish to thank the comments by honourable Hem Chand, honourable Jovesa Vocea and honourable Maharaj in supporting the Report. There were some good additional comments based on our recommendations, but please note that these were from 2011 to 2018 accounts. It is good that you are sharing the issues now, probably because of how we now operate. An honourable Member said to me that honourable Maharaj was also the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee at that time. So it is good that we are sharing information to improve the accounts.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of the sitting today. The Parliament now stands adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.44 p.m.

ANNEXURE I

Reply to Written Question No. 95/2025 tabled by the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts (Ref. Page 1532)



**MINISTER FOR ITAUKEI AFFAIRS AND CULTURE, HERITAGE AND ARTS
(Hon. I. Vasu)**

Reply to Question No. 95/2025 is as follows:

Section 4 of the iTaukei Trust Fund Act 2004 was amended by the iTaukei Affairs (Amendment) Act 2023 which stipulates:

“The purpose of the Fund is to:

- (a) provide financial independence and autonomy in relation to the operations and administration of the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC).”

Therefore, in light of the above, the breakdown of costs in support of the GCC’s administration and operations for the financial years 2023 to 2025 are as follows:

Particulars	Actual (\$)
Capital Cost	
Rebuilding of Vale ni Bose	7,580,662
Refurbishment of GCC Talanoa Lounge	1,743,997
GCC Official Vehicle – GCC Chairman	130,000
Total Capital Cost	\$9,454,659
Operational Cost – GCC Meeting Expenses	
Financial Year 2023	134,736
Financial Year 2024	340,158
Financial Year 2025	144,997
Total Meeting Expenses	\$619,891
GCC Secretariat	
2024	250,000
2025	242,120
Total GCC Secretariat	\$492,120
Total Operational Cost	\$1,112,011
Total Expenses Spent for the GCC [2023 to-date 30/07/2025]	\$10,566,669