

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

THURSDAY, 7TH AUGUST, 2025

[CORRECTED COPY]

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THURSDAY, 7TH AUGUST, 2025

The Parliament met at 9.38 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Minister for Youth and Sports, the honourable Assistant Minister for Information, honourable V. Nath and honourable K.K. Lal.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Wednesday, 6th August, 2025, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

A very good morning to all honourable Members who are present today. To our guests in the public gallery and those tuning in through broadcast and online channels, your attention and engagement infuse our democratic process with energy and meaning. Thank you for remaining informed, involved and inspired.

Greetings - Ambassador of the People's Republic of China

Honourable Members, please, join me in welcoming the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China, His Excellency Zhou Jian. Welcome to Parliament, Your Excellency. Thank you for joining us this morning.

Changes to Oral Questions

Honourable Members, you may have noted that two questions appear under the name of honourable Virendra Lal in today's Order Paper. Whilst this may seem to contravene Standing Order 41(4), it is because one of the questions was carried forward from Wednesday's Order Paper as previously communicated.

Additionally, please, note that today's first oral question has been brought forward from Friday's Order Paper. This adjustment was made in light of the request by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Cooperatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises' who will be away on Friday to attend the Pacific ICT Ministers Meeting.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

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

- (1) Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection;
- (2) Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts;
- (3) Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management;
- (4) Minister for Justice and Acting Attorney-General (2 Statements); and
- (5) Minister for Education (2 Statements).

The Ministers may speak up to 20 minutes. After the Minister, I will then invite the Leader of the Opposition or his designate, to speak on the Statement for no more than 5 minutes. There will be no other debate.

MR. SPEAKER. - I now call on the Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection to deliver her Statement.

Fiji Women's Economic Empowerment National Action Plan 2025-2030

HON. S. KIRAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members, dear Fiji; my greetings to you all - *ni sa yadra vinaka* and *Jai Shree Radhe*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to update the House on Fiji Women's Economic Empowerment National Action Plan (WEENAP) 2025- 2030, which was passed by Cabinet in June 2025. First, I wish to acknowledge 'Thursdays in Black' Initiative, a global campaign that calls on us to wear black every Thursday, to stand in solidarity with survivors of rape and violence, and to send a powerful message that we will not tolerate gender-based violence in any form. By wearing black, we amplify the voices of survivors, challenge the culture of silence, and call for a world free from violence, fear and discrimination. Every life lost to domestic violence is one too many, yet in Fiji, the tragedy continues to unfold in our homes.

In 2025, four women and one man have lost their lives to intimate partner violence. According to the Fiji Police Force's latest crime statistics for June 2025, sexual offences have increased by 28 percent, with 60 percent of the victims under the age of 18 years. Crime against children have risen by 8 percent, over half involving sexual abuse, and nearly a quarter of them committed within family homes. Domestic violence remains widespread, most often perpetrated by those closest to the victim.

I thank all the honourable Members of this House for wearing their awareness pin or wearing black today, demonstrating unity and resolve to end violence in all its forms. I urge every honourable Member in this House, the leaders in our faith traditions, in the business sector and our community leaders, please, speak out against gender-based violence and encourage your homes and communities to develop zero tolerance to all forms of violence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Women's Economic Empowerment National Action Plan (WEENAP) is born from a vision for women and girls in all their diversities to have the autonomy to define and achieve full and equitable economic empowerment through greater participation, leadership, agency and access to resources, supported by inclusive policy and a safe and enabling environment.

The development of the Fiji Women's Economic Empowerment National Action Plan 2025-2030 has been a collaborative and whole-of-Government effort led by the Ministry of Women, Children and

Social Protection. This initiative began with a high-level advisory workshop on Women's Economic Empowerment in April 2023, organised by our Ministry. The workshop brought together 50 experts and leaders from diverse sectors and organisations to identify the common challenges and opportunities facing women and girls in all their diversity.

Discussions highlighted the multifaceted roles women in Fiji play as leaders, workers, producers and entrepreneurs, and the challenges they face at individual, household and institutional levels, including navigating abusive relationships, managing caregiving responsibilities, addressing the impacts of climate change, and confronting restrictive social norms and institutional barriers that hinder their economic participation. I wish to pay tribute to the honourable Minister for Information for her leadership in this regard, during her term as the Minister for women.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, WEENAP directly advances the objectives of the Fiji National Development Plan (NDP) 2025- 2029, and Vision 2050 by promoting inclusive economic empowerment. The NDP affirms the need to institutionalise gender mainstreaming, gender responsive planning and budgeting to integrate gender perspectives across all levels of Government, to foster equal opportunities, address systemic inequalities, protect fundamental rights, and address gender-based violence.

It sets out specific targets to significantly improve women's participation and representation across key sectors and settings. For instance, women's participation in the labour force, which stands at 32 percent, is projected to reach 60 percent by 2030. Similarly, the share of women owning registered Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) currently at 19 percent is targeted to rise to 50 percent by 2029.

In leadership, the NDP seeks to elevate women's representation in Parliament from 10 percent to 30 percent, while increasing their presence on non-commercial boards from 27 percent and on commercial boards from 19 percent to 50 percent. The NDP prioritises advancing gender parity in education, aiming to increase female enrolment in tertiary Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics(STEM) courses from 25 percent to 50 percent by 2029.

The WEENAP provides a strategic framework for advancing the goals of the NDP across its pillars and key targets on women's economic empowerment, delivering tangible outcomes through a two-fold approach. First, it emphasises on individual and collective women's economic empowerment, including micro-level initiatives and community actions. Second, it prioritises the transformation of structural and systematic inequalities in economic policies, budgets and investments through gender mainstreaming and gender responsive planning and budgeting, and the strengthening of gender data and statistics across Government.

The WEENAP strives to create an enabling environment where women and girls, in all their diversities can fully participate, have their contributions recognised to thrive, driving the national economic growth and long-term resilience. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this context, the Plan's strategic framework focuses on four key pillars and multiple supporting strategies and actions. These pillars include:

- (1) enabling women at work through inclusive employment pathways and skills development;
- (2) supporting women in business and entrepreneurship;
- (3) enhancing women's greater financial inclusion and economic resilience; and
- (4) advancing women's health and wellbeing, while also recognising the need to address harmful social norms which hinder women's economic participation.

Mr. Speaker, the WEENAP is evidence-based, using local and global data to inform strategies and track progress. Equity is prioritised to address the needs of marginalised women, through targeted

measures. Inclusivity is actively promoted to ensure all members of society, including men and boys, play a role in challenging patriarchal norms. Sustainability will be achieved through a whole-of-government approach, with monitoring systems to ensure our commitments are met and progress remains transparent.

Mr. Speaker, the WEENAP is aligned with and contributes to Fiji's key national, regional and international commitments to gender equality and women's empowerment. These include the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals, and the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against all Women and Girls.

It also supports Fiji's obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD), the Beijing Platform for Action, the Pacific Platform for Action on Gender Equality and Women's Human Rights 2018-2030 and the revitalised Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration, among Others.

Mr. Speaker, women in all the diversities in Fiji play a pivotal role in driving the nation's economic development, contributing significantly across various sectors and settings. Their involvement in agriculture, fisheries, tourism, handicraft and MSMEs form the backbone of Fiji's economic activity, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas.

In agriculture and fisheries, women are often responsible for food security, food production, processing and vending, ensuring household sustenance and market supplies. Similarly, in tourism, a key pillar of Fiji's economy, women are integral as employees, entrepreneurs and cultural ambassadors. Mr. Speaker, they play a dominant role in health, education and social sectors, serving as educators, healthcare workers, social workers and caregivers, where their contributions are essential to improving national wellbeing and building human capital.

Additionally, women in Fiji bring invaluable knowledge in forestry and environmental conservation, playing a critical role in preserving ecosystems and addressing the climate crisis. They are also making strides in emerging sectors such as global outsourcing and business process management, highlighting their adaptability and innovation in a dynamic economic environment, as well as actively breaking barriers in male-dominated sectors.

Mr. Speaker, women are also at the heart of Fiji's economy, through their care work, both paid and unpaid, which underpins the functioning of families, communities and society. They perform majority of the unpaid labor, including caregiving, household and community management, supporting the wellbeing of households and our communities. Despite these invaluable contributions of women to Fiji's economic and social development, and the significant progress made as middle-income country in advancing gender equality, particularly through investments in education policy reforms, health and infrastructure, systemic challenges continue to hinder women's full economic participation and empowerment.

Mr. Speaker, according to the Global Gender Gap Report 2024, Fiji has achieved a gender parity score of 0.642, indicating that 64.2 percent of the overall gender gap has been closed. This positions Fiji at 128th out of 146 countries assessed. In the Economic Participation and Opportunities sub-index, Fiji has closed 58.9 percent of its gender gap, ranked 117th out of 156 countries. However, in the political empowerment, Fiji ranks 140th out of 146. Health and survival is at 106th and educational attainment at 107th in rank out of 146 countries.

Mr. Speaker, gender inequality and entrenched power imbalances within households and society remain fundamental root causes of economic disempowerment for women and girls in all the diversities.

Discriminatory social and cultural norms, along with gender neutral laws, policies and budget investments and the pervasive crisis of gender-based violence, continue to limit the full and equal participation in the economy.

Mr. Speaker, these overlapping and intersecting challenges and barriers have resulted in overrepresentation of women in low-wage, low-skilled and precarious jobs, particularly in the informal economy. Addressing these challenges require a comprehensive and multi-level approach. Sir, this involves shifting discriminatory attitudes, beliefs and practices within individuals, households and communities, while engaging men and whole of population; reforming policies and institutions, including workplaces, community organisations, and public and private sector, and transforming economic markets, value chains, laws, resource allocation and regulations at the national level.

Global evidence consistently suggests that substantial economic growth can be achieved when women are empowered to participate fully in the economy. Societies experience significant advancements in the growth, equality, and resilience. Targeted investments in measures such as formalisation of employment paths, customized skills training in emerging sectors, access to resources, legal and policy reforms and enhanced protections can elevate women's earnings by 30 percent, contributing up to 2 percent annually to GDP growth.

Prevention of violence against women and girls in all their diversities can help reduce economic cost of \$300 million, which is equivalent to 6.6 percent of Fiji's GDP. Additionally, the provision of accessible and regulated childcare stands out as a key intervention, enabling women to engage in economic activities. So, we welcome the extension of time in school for our preschool children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the implementation strategy of WEENAP is supported by a governance framework that ensures accountability, strategic oversight and coordinated execution. The WEENAP Secretariat will be co-chaired by Minister for Trade, Small, Micro and Medium Enterprises and Cooperatives and I as the Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection, and will consist of Government agencies and other relevant stakeholders as required for technical expertise, resourcing, coordination and support to facilitate ownership and effective implementation of actions under an agreed terms of reference.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the WEENAP Advisory Committee will be chaired by our Permanent Secretary with key CSO partners. Department of women is responsible for the day to day execution of the Action Plan. The Coalition Government across each Ministry already has targets to advance gender equality and equity. WEENAP will harmonize our activities and help monitor progress.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, WEENAP is our Government's commitment to inclusion, equity and empowerment, ensuring that women can equally participate in and benefit from decent work and social protection, access markets and have control over resources, and increased voice agency and meaningful participation in economic decision-making at all levels. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Leader of the Opposition or his designate, for his response.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; thank you for allowing me to reply to the Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection's Ministerial Statement on the Fiji Women's Economic Empowerment National Action Plan (WEENAP) 2025-2030. I want to first commend the honourable Minister for bringing this vital topic to the floor of Parliament. It is a sign of maturing democracy when we can openly and constructively discuss the aspirations and challenges of our citizens, particularly our women, who are the backbone of our families and communities.

We, on this side of the House, fully endorse the Government's stated commitment to women's economic empowerment. We recognise that empowering women is not just a social good, it is an economic necessity for our nation's prosperity. The WEENAP, as a strategic framework, is a welcome step, and its alignment with the National Development Plan's pillars of economic resilience, people empowerment and good governance is a sound approach.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a policy framework, no matter how well intentioned, is only as good as its implementation. My reply today is not to oppose the plan, but to ask the critical questions that must be addressed if this plan is to deliver tangible outcomes and not simply be another document on a shelf. We must bridge the gap between the Minister's words and the lived reality of women across Fiji. Let me begin with what the Minister will, undoubtedly, know as key achievement.

On education, data shows that our girls are succeeding in schools. Girls consistently outperform boys in national examinations and they complete lower secondary school at a higher rate. This is a time of which we should all be proud of. Our women are showing that they have the intellect, the drive and the qualifications to lead our nation. However, here is where the disconnect begins, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

If our women are so highly educated, why are they not equally represented and empowered in our workforce? The latest data from 2024 paints a stark and unacceptable picture. The female labour force participation rate is a paltry 38.5 percent while the male rate stands at a robust 76.7 percent. This is not a small gap. It is a chasm that cannot be ignored and that no amount of positive rhetoric can hide. What specific timebound targets does WEENAP have to close this glaring disparity?

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must address a deeply entrenched and archaic flaw in our legal and economic system - the gender pay gap and the principle of equal pay for work of equal value. The World Bank's own Women, Business and the Law 2024 report reveals that our laws do not mandate equal remuneration for work of equal value. This is an archaic and unacceptable omission that sends a clear message to every Fijian woman, "Your work, no matter how skilled or difficult is inherently worth less than that of men".

This legal blindspot undermines every single initiative in the WEENAP. I ask the honourable Minister to inform this House if a plan includes a firm commitment to immediately reform our laws to ensure equal pay for equal work. Anything less is not a plan for empowerment, it is a plan for continued inequality.

We also cannot discuss women's economic empowerment without confronting the burden of unpaid care work. The World Bank tells us that women in Fiji spend 2.9 times as much time as on unpaid domestic and care work than men do. This is not a statistic, it is a fundamental barrier to a woman's ability to find a job, to excel in a career, or to start her own business. It is a barrier that exists in our homes, and it is a barrier that limits our nation's potential. I challenge the honourable Minister to detail how the WEENAP will address the societal norm. What tangible policies will be put in place to invest in affordable and accessible childcare to encourage shared parental leave and to run public campaigns that challenge these outdated gender roles?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our economy is currently facing a labour exodus with thousands of skilled Fijians leaving our shores for better opportunities abroad. It is a critical issue that WEENAP must address. We must not only train our women but also create the opportunities and fair wages necessary to retain their talent. How will the WEENAP work with the private sector ensure that the skills women gain are not simply a qualification for jobs in Australia or New Zealand?

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we welcome the WEENAP as a recognition of a problem that needs solving but we must insist that this plan is a direct response to the hard data. It must address the

yawning gap between women's educational achievements and the economic reality. It must dismantle the archaic legal and social barriers, particularly on equal pay and unpaid work. It must ensure that our commitment to women's empowerment is not just a headline but a lasting legacy of equality and prosperity for all Fijians. Thank you, Sir, *vinaka vakalevu*.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I invite the next Minister, honourable Members, please, kindly note that Oral Question No. 111 of 2025 in today's Order Paper will now drop, as it has been addressed through the Ministerial Statement by the Honourable Minister for women, Children and Social Protection, which has just been delivered.

Insights from the UK-Fiji Diaspora Engagement Tour

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of this august House, our fellow Fijians, those who are tuning in through television and social media; before I commence with my Ministerial Statement, I just want to advise that with the plan that has been put together by the honourable Minister of Women who has just presented her Ministerial Statement, we will address the overarching problems that had been faced by our women which has been ongoing for so many years. With the plan, we will surely address the issues that had been raised this morning.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to provide this august House with a report of the UK Fiji Roadshow 2025, which was held in May this year, and to inform Parliament and the people of Fiji about the key outcomes, challenges and future directions arising from these initiatives.

Mr. Speaker, the UK Fiji Roadshow was a significant whole-of-government effort led by the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs in close partnership with the Fiji High Commission in London and major *iTaukei* institutions. These include the:

- (1) iTaukei Land Trust Board;
- (2) iTaukei Trust Fund Board;
- (3) iTaukei Affairs Board commercial arm;
- (4) iTaukei Lands and Fisheries Commission;
- (5) Ministry of Justice;
- (6) support agencies such as -
 - (i) Fiji National Provident Fund;
 - (ii) Fijian Elections Office;
 - (iii) Public Rental Board; and
 - (iv) Fijian Holdings Unit Trust.

This was the first government-led roadshow of its kind to the United Kingdom. It brought direct services and engagement to our diaspora across 13 locations, including key Garrison Bases, towns with large Fijian population and other regional centres. Mr. Speaker, the roadshow was designed to connect our government to our people abroad, to respond to longstanding needs around identity, land, investment, documentation and cultural connections.

Over two weeks, more than 1,500 Fijians were directly assisted and thousands more engaged through community *talanoa* presentations and outreach. Many travelled from distant cities and lined up overnight. Some tearfully expressed that for the first time in many years, Fiji has come to them. Let me highlight the key results:

- (1) The iTaukei Lands and Fisheries Commission facilitated Vola ni Kawa Bula (VKB) registrations and updates, especially for children of Fijians born abroad. These connections

to identity with the *vanua* are deeply important for our people. A total of 1,538 individuals were directly assisted through the eight iTaukei Lands and Fisheries Commission services, with many accessing multiple services. The number of those indirectly assisted was even greater, highlighting the strong demand and impact of the roadshow.

- (2) The Fijian Elections Office registered over 400 voters, with many correcting or updating their voter details. A recurring concern was around postal ballot delays, particularly during the 2022 elections. This matter has been noted and forwarded to the appropriate authorities for consideration.
- (3) The Ministry of Justice processed over 578 civil registry requests, including births, deaths and marriages, collecting nearly \$8,000 in fees - a clear sign of the demand for essential services abroad.
- (4) The Fiji National Provident Fund helped many diaspora Fijians start or resume their voluntary contributions. Over \$44,000 in contributions were processed through digital platforms during the roadshow.
- (5) The iTaukei Land Trust Board handled over 770 lease-related queries, including residential, agricultural and business investment. These engagements are forecasted to generate over \$1.8 million in lease premium and close to \$800,000 in annual lease rent income for the iTaukei landowners.
- (6) The Fijian Holding Units Trust opened 589 new accounts, with over \$300,000 in initial investment and projects over \$1.4 million in annual top-up from the UK diaspora.
- (7) The iTaukei Trust Fund Board and the iTaukei Affairs Board received over 230 cultural and development-related queries, ranging from investment interests to cultural education and integration into the *vanua* structures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an important initiative promoted was the Solesau Online Language and Culture Programme, jointly developed by the UK Fijian Community, the University of East Anglia and the iTaukei Trust Fund Board. It directly responds to the growing fear that many children of our diaspora are losing their language, customs and sense of identity.

In addition to the service delivery, my delegation also attended key meetings, as follows:

- A meeting with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association where we discussed Fiji's democratic reforms, indigenous empowerment and digital misinformation.
- An inspiration gathering with Pacific Youth at Marlborough House, where I challenged our young people to retain cultural pride while pursuing excellence.
- A moving visit to the grave of Sergeant Talaiasi Labalaba, our fallen Fijian British hero, and a *Talanoa* session with Fijian soldiers in the British Armed Forces.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this roadshow brought to light a number of challenges that our diaspora communities continue to face, such as –

- Limited access to Fijian Government services, particularly documentation and land services.
- Growing language loss and cultural disconnect among second generation Fijians abroad.
- Regulatory and logistical difficulties for diaspora investors and potential land developers.

- Concern around postal voting, kava restrictions in the UK and access to Government-backed investment platforms from overseas.
- A strong desire for greater recognition and inclusion of the diaspora in the national development planning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to share some challenges observed during the roadshow, along with possible solutions. These include:

- (1) The need to establish a Diaspora Affairs Coordination Unit in Fiji.
- (2) Enhanced digital government services for overseas Fijians.
- (3) Support mechanism for diaspora investment, land development and business linkages.
- (4) Expansion of language and culture learning platforms.
- (5) Inter-agency approaches to improve diaspora engagement and representation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with remittance now one of the largest sources of foreign income for the Fijian economy, it is imperative that we recognise our diaspora as a national asset. Just as we do with our major industries and export commodities, where we have developed special policies, budget allocations and concessions for tourism, sugar and other key sectors, we must likewise create dedicated pathways and enabling environment for diaspora engagement. These include:

- (1) streamlining access to government services;
- (2) removing barriers to investment; and
- (3) building long term trust so that our people abroad can confidently contribute to Fiji's economic development and cultural continuity.

Before I conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to express my deepest gratitude to His Excellency Jovilisi Suveinakama, the Fiji High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, and his dedicated staff, for their outstanding coordination and hospitality throughout the Roadshow.

I also sincerely thank the members of the Fijian community in the United Kingdom, including the families and community leaders across all the garrison bases and locations we visited, for their warm welcome, generosity and care for our team. A special appreciation is extended to the many volunteers who selflessly assisted us, driving us from town to town, ensuring our safety, and supporting the delegation every step of the way. *Vinaka vakalevu* to each one of you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we reflect on the success of the UK-Fiji Roadshow, let us also recognise that our people abroad remain an integral part of our national story. They are Fijians, not just in name but in heart, identity and spirit. They contribute through remittance, skills, knowledge, and now more than ever, through a desire to invest, reconnect and give back to their *vanua*. It is now our responsibility to build a system that supports their inclusion, not only as beneficiaries of services, but as active partners in development and nation building. *Vinaka vakalevu*, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it will be a challenge for me to cover the Statement made in 15 minutes to 20 minutes in the five minutes that I have been allocated, so I will just pick some issues that the honourable Minister has stated.

The honourable Minister's Statement is titled - Strengthening Ties Beyond Our Shores: Insights from the UK-Fiji Diaspora Engagement Tour. I understand that the team included iTLTB and other Government agencies, which formed the Fiji-UK Roadshow 2025. I also understand over the two weeks, the honourable Minister and Government agencies visited communities in key cities, including Aberdeen, Stoke-on-Trent, Cottesmore, Catterick, Edinburgh and Inverness.

I thank the honourable Minister for the empowerment of language and culture, land utilisation, resource development and entrepreneurship, and investment and commerce to our iTaukei members in the United Kingdom (UK). Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be making my personal view on iTaukei empowerment in commerce in my End of Week Statement tomorrow, and I hope I will bring some personal view in that statement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we appreciate the other services that other Government agencies provided, which included the Births, Deaths and Marriages (BDM) on registration in the Vola ni Kawa Bula (VKB) and entrances and omission of death. Services were also provided by the Ministry of Immigration, FNPF, Elections Office, Fijians Holding Unit Trust (FHUT) and the iTaukei Trust Fund Board (TTFB), with the commercial arm of iTaukei Affairs Board.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I understand that the visit continued to Gloucester and Plymouth, and wrapped up in London. The presence of iTLTB was greatly appreciated by the diaspora, as many Fijians living abroad wished to remain involved in their *vanua*, from leases and estate planning, to development and even starting businesses. I understand that Fijians came out in numbers to make the most out of that opportunity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I additionally understand that concerns were raised included the legalisation of *yaqona* export to the UK. The honourable Minister did not highlight that, but I read a note that indicated that there was a concern from the UK diaspora on the legalisation of *yaqona* export. I also understand that there was a push for the reinstatement of a Korean Air flight from the UK back to Fiji, as it is much more efficient and cheaper for our nationals living in the UK.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to respond to the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs' Ministerial Statement this morning.

Update on the Nabavatu Village Relocation Project

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament, as well as citizens of Fiji listening or watching the parliamentary proceedings on the television or internet; *ni sa bula vinaka saka*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today, I stand before you to provide an update on the Nabavatu Relocation Village Project, an initiative to secure the future and safety of the Nabavatu community in Dreketi, Macuata Province, following the devastation and land instability caused by *TC Ana* in 2021. This multimillion dollar relocation project is estimated at approximately \$5.9 million, and is structured in four main phases, each designed to ensure a smooth transition from the current vulnerable site to a safer, permanent location at Nadoiviri.

Phase 1 involves the essential civil works, including drainage upgrades, road access improvements and water access infrastructure. These foundational works are vital to prepare the new site for the community's relocation. Detailed technical and topography surveys have been conducted to guarantee the safety and suitability of the land for habitation.

Phase 2 marks the construction phase where Engineering Express Limited has been awarded the contract to build 37 new homes. This phase also includes the installation of water reticulation systems and the connection of homes to the main EFL power grid, ensuring that the new community will be fully serviced and sustainable. The timber for construction is sourced under careful management with consent from the local landowning *mataqali*, respecting traditions and promoting community involvement.

Phase 3 focuses on community infrastructure, finishing touches such as the construction of footpaths and footbridges within the village. These are critical for safe and accessible connectivity throughout the settlement, enhancing the quality of life for all residents.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Phase 4, is the monitoring phase where engineers will conduct thorough reviews of all construction work to ensure compliance with building plans and standards. This guarantees the structural integrity and safety of all facilities and homes before the community moves in.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are currently in Phase 2 of the project, the construction phase, and I am pleased to provide a positive progress update. The civil and drainage works, along with land clearing, have been successfully completed. Additionally, the road civil works have been finalised by the Public Works Department.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Engineering Express Limited diligently continues with the construction of 37 homes across three terraces that constitute the Nabavatu relocation site layout. Specifically, Terrace 1, is allocated for 8 homes; Terrace 2, for 18 homes; and Terrace 3 for 11 homes. Currently, the foundations of these homes are at various stages of completion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, construction progress on site remains positive, notwithstanding some inevitable delays caused by adverse weather conditions and necessary adaptations to the foundation designs to ensure structural integrity. Engineering Express Limited remains committed to maintaining efficiency, quality and adherence to timelines.

The Ministry, through the Office of the Commissioner Northern Division, continues to coordinate closely with the contractor, ensuring smooth execution of each phase while addressing any challenges proactively. With consistent progress and well-managed resources, we are confident in meeting project milestones as planned.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry through the office of the Commissioner Northern Division, remains actively engaged with land-owning units, as well as the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry, to facilitate the procurement of timber for use in home construction and to secure the necessary logging licences.

The Ministry's newly established Relocation Unit, Mr. Speaker, Sir, continues to coordinate these works with the Divisional Commissioner's Office and continues to work closely with the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change.

The Ministry continues to be a dedicated and key participant in the Fiji Taskforce for Relocation and Displacement. A finalised list of 43 communities identified as highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change has been endorsed by the Taskforce Force for relocation assessments. This list is currently being prepared for submission to Cabinet for approval.

The Nabavatu Relocation Project, Mr. Speaker, Sir, embodies a government-led and community-supported approach to climate relocation funded through the Climate Relocation of Communities Trust Fund and bilateral support. It represents a model for future relocation efforts aimed at protecting vulnerable communities from the increasing impacts of climate change. We remain committed, Sir, to supporting the Nabavatu people until their full resettlement is achieved and ensuring that their new homes and communities are safe, resilient and sustainable for generations to come.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first of all let me acknowledge the Ministerial Statement this morning by the honourable Minister and, of course, acknowledge the Government in progressing this very, very important assistance to the community of Nabavatu.

In doing so, can I just quickly acknowledge a few stakeholders, one is the Assemblies of God (AOG) Church in Nabavatu. They willingly gave their compound, their land and, of course, their assistance in the temporary relocation of the community after the events of December 2020 during *TC Yasa* and, again, the following year around January during *TC Ana*.

I also wish to acknowledge the *Turaga na Vunivalu e Dreketi*, for his patience and, of course, his willingness to finally say 'yes' to the relocation. Relocation is not an easy issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and we wish to acknowledge the leadership of the *vanua* of the *Turaga na Vunivalu e Dreketi* and his elders. Perhaps, we also need to acknowledge the late Ambassador Filimone Kau. He played a critical role in the early negotiations as well. Even the late *Turaga ni Koro* of Nabavatu - Kavika, who has also gone, but these were the initial dates for the relocation of the Nabavatu community. We are thankful that significant progress has been made and, of course, we are also thankful for the allocation of resources, particularly the funds that has enabled them to be relocated to the new location.

Perhaps, I will concentrate on one key issue. Yesterday, we talked about refugees, and I know that Government has now formed the establishment of a relocation unit and a taskforce for relocation and displacement. I emphasised these two issues yesterday, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the honourable Minister for Immigration talked about the new SOP that they have for refugees. I also emphasised the importance of also expediting this issue of internal displacement because this is very relevant and critical for Pacific Islanders and for Fiji as well.

This is not the first time we have internally displaced communities. In recent times in Fiji, due to some political events, some of our people were displaced. They wanted to claim refugee status, but they did not qualify because for refugees, you have to cross an international border, but you are internally displaced. Therefore, we also need to look at our internally displaced processes and systems. Of course, the relocation guideline that was launched in Katowice in 2018 would really be helpful for us in that regard.

When we are doing this, if we can go back to 2015, apart from the SDGs, there were three critical agreements in 2015 that complemented the SDGs:

- (1) Addis Ababa Action Agenda, which is about international cooperation in the mobilisation of resources, finances, et cetera;
- (2) Paris Agreement; and
- (3) Sendai Framework.

As we are doing this locally, what is important, Mr. Speaker, when we are doing this is that, we, from this side of the House, offer our assistance in terms of bipartisanship in these issues because these are important issues and affect our people. What is important in this is, what is our own responsibility in the recent budget? I requested for an additional \$5 million for relocation purposes because of our responsibility. We will talk later about Parliament responsibility in terms of the SDGs.

However, because of time factor, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have our own obligations and with our data and framework in place, we can then go for assistance through the Addis Ababa Action Agenda and, of course, climate financing and disaster financing. If we want to get our people out of this poverty cycle, such initiatives are so important. Homes are very important, before we address other issues.

I will end there, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because of the time. Thank you, honourable Minister for your Statement this morning.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, this is an appropriate time to suspend proceedings for our morning break. Parliament proceeding is suspended, and we will resume in half an hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.34 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.14 a.m.

FNU Naiyaca Campus Construction Project

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet colleagues and honourable Members of this House; I rise today to inform this august House and update you on the Fiji National University (FNU) Naiyaca Campus Project in Labasa.

Mr Speaker, Sir, in reference and as highlight in the Fiji National University Annual Report 2024, it declared a significant event in the report – impairment of the Naiyaca Campus Project. In accounting terms, impairment refers to a substantial unexpected decline in an asset's recoverable value that requires immediate recognition in financial statements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as documented in the Annual Report, I wish to highlight the following background regarding the project. The Naiyaca Campus Project was initiated in 2013 as part of the Look North Policy with an estimated total project cost of \$30 million. The project was jointly funded by Government through capital grants and internal funding from FNU.

Following preliminary civil works, the main construction commenced in 2018. The project was abandoned in 2019, leading to a significant deterioration of the partially-completed structure. Efforts to re-tender the project in 2020 were deferred due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the project was subsequently placed on hold by the Ministry of Education.

In October 2021, a repurposing proposal was submitted to the Ministry of Economy to explore alternative uses for the site. At its meeting in June 2022, the University Council resolved to recommence the Naiyaca Campus Project. However, the Expression of Interest (EOI) process for a new project manager was unsuccessful.

In 2023, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a new council for the University was appointed and a Project Implementation Monitoring Unit was established to oversee the project's completion. Following due diligence of three independent engineering reports in March 2025, the Council resolved to demolish the structure due to its unsafe condition and structural failures.

Consequently, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the University recognised the following imperative changes in its financial statements for the financial year ended 31st December, 2024. Sir, \$7.6 million representing capital costs by Government was recognised as profit or loss and \$2.3 million representing capitalised costs by FNU was recognised as profit or loss.

Furthermore, as at 31st December, 2024, the liability in relation to capital costs incurred to date funded by the Government was transferred from deferred income to trade and other payables in line with the grant agreement and the remaining work in progress in relation to this project totalled \$4.3 million, which represents the civil works performed to-date.

The Management and Council of the FNU strengthened the oversight of the capital projects and continue to monitor and evaluate all ongoing and future capital investments to ensure sound governance, accurate valuation and robust risk management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the following measures have been undertaken by the University to ensure transparency and to revive this vital project in the North. On 5th September, 2023, the FNU Council engaged KPMG to conduct an audit of the Naiyaca Campus Project. The audit identified numerous anomalies, from the initial planning process, governance structure, overseeing the project, the awarding

of various tenders, risk assessment and records management. The review of improvement of payments and managing variations, amongst other things.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the detailed audit findings from KPMG is the lack of business case, detailed feasibility study and campus planning. The governance issue of the Labasa Project Committee predominantly comprised of council members. The Head of Construction Implementation Unit at that time significantly influenced the tender process relating to the main contractor, as follows -

- Key governance documents and risk assessment process anomalies in the appointment of the project management consultants, with concerns with evaluating the sole eligible tender for the main contractor and the technical criteria applied for the evaluation.
- A poorly managed payment structure for the project management consultants.
- Lack of documentation for changes in scope of works for main contractor.
- Issues relating to non-payment of subcontractors.
- Slow progress and delays in the eventual termination of the main contractor.
- Legal dispute regarding the recovery of the performance bond.

The auditors made recommendations to strengthen each of the above areas for the management of future major capital projects of the Council.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, based on the findings of the audit, FNU lodged a formal complaint with FICAC on 30th July, 2024, and is currently awaiting the outcome of the investigation.

On 16th July 2025, the FNU Council considered a paper detailing the progress of the capital works for the Naiyaca Campus. The Council approved a revised draft schematic plan and endorsed the next steps required to advance the project. The revised plan makes provisions to both higher education, technical and vocational education, and training to be facilitated at the same Campus. These include facilities to support technical and industrial curriculum workshops.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am advised that the FNU Council is collaborating with the Ministry of Works to formalise the terms of reference and is expected to soon call for a public tender for the design and construction of the project's pathways. Once plans are finalised and cost estimates are thoroughly assessed, the university will be in a strong position to assess its capital needs to complete the project. This may include seeking support from Government and donor partners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the University has set an ambitious goal to complete construction in time for classes to commence at the Naiyaca Campus by Semester 1, 2027.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, it is crucial that Government funded projects should be monitored closely and any abuse of taxpayers' funds be discouraged. Those implicated in the wastage need to be noted and addressed. Subsequently, they must not be allowed anywhere near such project management again and must be addressed by the law for such blatant mismanagement.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now invite the Leader of the Opposition or his designate for his response.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also thank the honourable Minister for his Ministerial Statement. I would like to highlight the bold vision of the previous government - a vision that turned into reality with the establishment of our very own Fiji National University (FNU). This was no ordinary achievement; it was a landmark investment in the future of Fiji, a commitment to bringing higher learning within the reach of every Fijian, from our cities to the most remote areas.

We did not just create another institution, we built a foundation for opportunities, development and growth that will serve generations to come. Under our stewardship, FNU was transformed; world class educational infrastructure was developed with careful planning and commitment. New buildings and a modern innovative learning environment became the standard, providing our students with resources and facilities they needed to thrive.

We took pride in building a new sports complex to nurture athletic talent and promote healthy living, recognising that education is not just about classrooms, but about holistic development. We also established a state-of-the-art three-storey Marine Academy in Nasese, designed specifically to equip Fijians with critical skills in the maritime industry, a sector that is fundamental to the prosperity of our island nation.

Our commitment to fairness and access was unwavering. The Naiyaca Campus under the Labasa Campus Project stands as a testament to that. We brought quality education to the Northern Division, a Division long denied the chance to study close to home.

Civil works for this project began between 2014 and 2016, marking a new era of opportunity for our Northern communities. This project was comprehensive – lecture theatres, tutorial rooms, computer laboratories, science laboratories, conference rooms, libraries and administrative spaces, were all meticulously planned. We entrusted this project to qualified professionals: project managers, quantity surveyors, engineers, and experts dedicated to seeing the vision through this precision and care.

Let me read out, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the project manager was Civil Engineering & Environmental Solution; the architects were Design Hut; civil and structural engineer were Engineered Designs PTE Ltd; building service consultants were Edison Consultants Ltd; quality surveyor was Quantech Pacific Limited; acoustic engineer was Wood Grove & Stantec; and land surveyors were Land Planning and Surveying Consultants. It was not like this project was left on its own.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- So what happened?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Yes, challenges did arise. Sir, FNU rightly terminated contracts in March 2020 after no progress was made since August 2019, despite repeated plans for completion. The court upheld this decision on 6th October, 2021, confirming the rightful termination and enabling FNU to encash the bond of over \$2 million. We can sit here and talk big, but let me tell you, as an individual, when we are constructing our own homes...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

It is the opportunity for her to represent the Opposition in respect to the Ministerial Statement. Please, Ministers and honourable Members of Government, let her deliver her statement, then you can respond anytime later when the opportunity arises.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was trying to say, even as an individual, when we are trying to construct our homes, we get into a lot of trouble with our carpenters, plumbers and the construction company. This is a big, massive project and the government did establish and recruited the right people to monitor and look after that project. I agree with the honourable Minister that KPMG reviewed it, they came up with a report and you have referred it to FICAC. That is the best way to go and that is what every government should do. Anyone who did not do their job, should be taken to task. There is nothing big about it.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- \$30 million.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I know, but in any particular situation, cost is involved, but you cannot foresee that you can get into trouble. We have successfully completed so many other projects. You can run into problems with one or two projects. It is natural!

There were ongoing legal matters involving the Bank of Baroda and the contractor regarding the bond money with FNU. That was another reason why the project dragged on, because Bank of Baroda was trying to recover its losses through the bond money which FNU was holding on. It is important to clearly state that no money was wasted.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the contractor was paid \$11.4 million for the work completed, amounting to 47 percent of the project, even though payment was made only for 42 percent over the disputes and delays. I heard the honourable Minister talking about the audit report and that there were other structures that are no longer viable because of the delay in getting ahead with that project. Those structures cannot be used because of that long period but, again, we all understand, if the matter is before the court, you cannot start doing the construction work. You have to wait for the court decision before you can proceed. That was one of the reasons why there was a delay. So, the previous government's legacy is very clear.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Kumar, you wrap up your statement. I will give you an extra minute because of interruptions.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, FNU stands as a beacon of hope, excellence and opportunity for all Fijians, regardless of their location. We laid the groundwork solid, visionary, and unwavering, that continues to serve our people and shape our nation's future. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for your understanding.

Memorandum of Co-operation – Ministry of Justice Fiji and Ministry of Justice Japan

Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; I warmly greet you this morning. I also welcome those joining us through livestream from across the globe; *ni sa bula vinaka*. I would like to pay special attention to Mr. Orisi Matatolu, who is the Laboratory Manager, serving in Fakaofu Hospital, Tokelau, from Navakasiga, Wainunu in Bua, who is watching the livestream this morning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to update this august House on my recent official visit to Tokyo, Japan, where I had the privilege of representing the Fijian Government at the Fiji-Japan Strategic Dialogue on Law and Justice, hosted by the Government of Japan. This visit and execution of a Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) was endorsed in Cabinet in June 2025. The Japanese Government funded 90 percent of the cost of the Ministry of Justice delegation and for that, we extend our utmost appreciation. The visit was not only an opportunity for high level bilateral engagement, but also a pivotal moment in the advancement of Fiji's justice sector.

The highlight of the mission was the signing of the MoC between the Republic of Fiji and the Government of Japan, aimed at strengthening legal and institutional cooperation between our two nations. The MoC aligns with Fiji's vision for a justice system that is accessible, inclusive, rehabilitative and technologically-equipped to serve all our people, especially the vulnerable.

Mr. Speaker, in our bilateral discussion through the Memorandum of Cooperation, several priority areas of cooperation were highlighted, such as the:

- (1) Digitisation of systems and registries to modernise civil and legal records management across the Ministry of Justice.
- (2) Capacity building for justice personnel, including judges, officers, legal drafters, correctional officers and social workers.
- (3) Strength of Fiji's "diversion first" approach to children in conflict with the law, in line with the Child Justice Act 2024.
- (4) Promoting of access to justice and human rights in the context of our Narcotics Counter-Narcotics Strategy 23-28.

Mr. Speaker, in addition to the Minister of Justice engagement, senior officials of the Fiji Corrections Service (FCS) also presented on the progress of the needs of FCS, a crucial arm of our justice system.

The FCS continues to rebuild the stability and trust within the facility, as well as the active promotion of rehabilitation of our people, to ensure that they are able to reintegrate economically, socially and mentally into their communities, despite the many challenges and limited resources that FCS has. We requested support for the Fiji Corrections Service management staff and inmates to ensure that we provide the best possible prospects for those who are serving and those who are incarcerated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were also hosted to a technical study tour of the Kawagoe Juvenile Prison as part of a broader engagement under the Strategic Dialogue on Law and Justice. It was both insightful and inspiring in the context of Fiji's own reforms under the Child Justice Act 2024, which prioritises diversion, rehabilitation and reintegration as a preferred response to juvenile offending. These are the programmes for the juvenile prison that must also be considered in the adult prison in our context. Kawagoe Juvenile Prison is one of Japan's specialised correctional institutions for young male offenders aged between 16 and 26.

For Fiji, the programmes could easily be part of youth diversion wraparound services that will be part of our young people who come into conflict with the law before they turn 18. The Kawagoe facility emphasises rehabilitation over retribution. The prison provides a highly structured, humane and rehabilitative environment, aimed at transforming behaviour, nurturing responsibility and supporting reintegration into society.

The features of the Kawagoe institution include educational and vocational programmes tailored to each inmate's level and interest, psychological counseling and behavioural therapy with a focus on trauma, substance abuse and anger management, rehabilitation through discipline, self-reflection and moral education.

Family involvement ensures that rehabilitation efforts are supported by the broader community. Highly trained correctional officers, many of whom are specialised in child development and adolescent psychology. It is worth noting that the design, operation and ethos of the Kawagoe facility align closely with international standards on the rights and freedom of children in conflict with the law. Our adult correctional facilities would need to be strengthened along this line.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, rehabilitation is not an ideal, it is an obligation. It shows us that when we treat young offenders, indeed, all offenders, with dignity, it offers them real pathway for change and support their reintegration. We will not only change their lives, but we will also strengthen our communities and our nation.

As Minister for Justice, I will be working closely with the Fiji Corrections Service, the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection and our development partners, including UNICEF and JICA to assess the feasibility of adopting elements of the Kawagoe model to Fiji under the Child Justice Act

2024, where we provide wraparound services in the community for young people, giving them a real chance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the society is judged not by how it treats its strongest, but by how it treats its most vulnerable. Our children, even those who make mistakes, deserve a second chance; an opportunity to correct, to learn and to grow. Another significant engagement that took place during my recent official visit to Tokyo, Japan, was the high-level presentation delivered by Coursera Corporation, showcasing the cutting-edge digital voting system.

As honourable Members will appreciate, the conduct of a free, fair and credible election is the cornerstone of any democracy. As Fiji continues to modernise its institutions, the potential for digital innovation to enhance transparency, participation and efficiency within our electoral process must be seriously explored. The Coursera digital voting system represents a secure, accessible and technological robust solution, designed to streamline the electoral process, from voter registrations through to final tabulation of results. Key features of the Coursera digital system include:

- (1) biometric verification to ensure all eligible voters cast ballots;
- (2) encrypted end-to-end voting systems that safeguard data integrity;
- (3) real time results transmission to improve transparency and reduce administrative delays;
- (4) remote voting capabilities for citizens residing abroad or in remote locations; and
- (5) a fully auditable digital paper trail to enhance public confidence.

Coursera had tested their new platform in December 2024 for a local city election. The digital voting was successfully without incident and demonstrated promising outcomes in terms of both the voter turnout and result accuracy within one hour of the close of election.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji stands to gain substantially from such a system, particularly as we strive to modernise the electoral infrastructure and promote inclusive democratic participation. As a government committed to digital transformation, I believe that the presentation by Coursera was both, timely and relevant. I will be holding discussions with the Fijian Elections Office, Ministry of Local Government, Ministry of Communication and other key stakeholders to initiate a feasibility assessment of the digital voting technologies suitable for our context.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, digital voting is not about replacing democracy, it is about strengthening it. It is about ensuring that every eligible Fijian has the opportunity to participate in shaping our future, no matter where they live or what barriers they may face.

I commend Coursera Corporation for the innovation and thank the Government of Japan for facilitating this presentation. It represents another step towards a stronger, more inclusive and technologically-equipped Fiji. The visit has reaffirmed Japan's commitment to supporting Fiji in realising a justice system that is fair, efficient, rehabilitative and future-ready. The signed Memorandum of Cooperation marks a major milestone Fiji's justice reform journey; one that integrates modern technology, regional partnership, human rights principles and a deep focus on rehabilitation and diversion.

On behalf of the Fijian Government, I express my sincere gratitude to the Government of Japan and our development partners for their trust and support. Together, we are laying the foundation for a justice sector that works for all Fijians now and in generations to come.

Before I conclude, I extend my appreciation to the staff of the Fiji Embassy in Tokyo. *Vinaka vakalevu* Ms Kelera Savu, Chargé d'affaires; Ms. Karalaini Mua, Second Secretary; Ms. Minnie and Roberta, and to the Fijian diaspora who came out in numbers to provide support to its embassy staff, as well as share stories of their journey in Japan and the love of their homeland.

Your stories inspire us to continue to provide and extend our services to our diaspora wherever you may be. Thank you, Mr. Waqabaca, for leading the Government's charge at the World Expo 2025 in Osaka. We have every belief that the Fiji Pavilion will showcase the country's culture, heritage and innovation. It will highlight Fiji's commitment to sustainability, economic growth, access to justice, investment opportunities, cultural displays and global collaboration. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. God bless Fiji.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I thank the honourable Acting Attorney-General for his Ministerial speech. Mr. Speaker, I think it needs to be said that Japan has been a very, very good friend of Fiji and this memorandum of cooperation comes on the back of quite a few that were signed earlier with respect to the tourism sector. I think the honourable Prime Minister signed the bilateral agreement and from a trade perspective, they have Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) that has also signed a memorandum with Investment Fiji. I think the Ministry of Youth and Sports have also engaged with one of the prefectures in Japan, so you can see the strength of the relationship that we have with Japan, and it is important that we continue to have that, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, this memorandum comes at a very timely stage. Some of the portions of it and the key areas of cooperation that has been mentioned by the honourable Minister with respect to digitising systems and capacity-building, for justice personnel, and for strengthening Fiji's approach to children in conflict with the law and access to justice and human rights, comes at a good time, Sir. We are always looking at strengthening our institutional capacities and integrity, so it will be important for us to ensure that the follow up is done on these memorandums that we have with respect to co-operation. I am looking forward to seeing the work of the working group that is going to be involved in all of these, especially as there are some very important sectors – anti-corruption, transparency and accountability.

The frameworks and integrity systems also form a part of it. These are issues that are sorely needed in terms of assistance on where we stand. The institutional strengthening part of it is also important, Sir. Japan is a First World country, and we must look at it in terms of how it can be helpful to us. It is critically important because of all our independent institutions that we have, that require integrity.

The digitising of the systems is also part of the memorandum and that is important to us at this stage. I know a lot of work is being done by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister with respect to digitisation and a lot of strength is coming out of the cooperation with Japan.

Mr. Speaker, the issue that was raised regarding juvenile prison is an area that would be extremely helpful to us. We have done some work on it earlier. There were some laws that were passed, et cetera, but this is an important area that we must look at to see that we should actually do right and keep in line with international laws.

As I have said earlier, Mr. Speaker, all of these comes on the back of a very important agreement that has been signed and, hopefully, the Ministry of Justice now has a working group to gather soon to try and organise the work that needs to be done with respect to our justice sector.

One of the other areas that is also extremely important is the training that can be given to our judiciaries and that is extremely important also for us. It will be very helpful to us. We have a youngish judiciary in terms of magistracy, at the moment, and the more training that they get offshore in First World countries the better it is for us. The exchange in terms of prosecutors, corrections officers and election officials; these are areas that are crucially important to us, and it would be very beneficial to Fiji as a nation, to ensure that we get the necessary training and updating when visiting those particular nations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the Memorandum, and I thank the Government of Japan for the assistance that they continue to give us. They are one of the key components in our development, Sir, and they have been for many, many years. Our tourism industry grew on the back of Japanese tourism to what it is today. We are extremely grateful to the Japanese Government for their assistance always at bad times and in good times. With those words, I look forward to seeing the working group's work.

External Review of the Three Main Universities In Fiji

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of this august House; I rise to highlight to this august House the findings of the External Review Committee (ERC) on three of our national universities, namely the Fiji National University (FNU), the University of South Pacific (USP) and the University of Fiji (UniFiji), and the process undertaken by the Higher Education Commission.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as discussed in my response to the earlier question on Monday, the ERC is appointed by Higher Education Commission Fiji, and this review is mandated by law under the Higher Education Act 2008. The review committee members are selected under the Act and under the guidance of the previous Director of Higher Education Commission, Dr. Rohit Kishore. They are Professor Pramesh Narayan, as earlier highlighted, Dr. Thelma Rahman and Mr. Rex Croy, who are all contracted, and Mr. Joel Abraham and Ms. Seema Shandil.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the information of this House, three of the contracted members are yet to be paid their contracts, but their overheads and expenses have been paid on accommodation and travel. Upon the completion of the initial report, the ERC submitted the document to the Commission, in the interest of due diligence and to ensure the integrity of the findings. The Commission had initially resolved to engage an independent consultant to audit the report. However, the three Universities requested access to the ERC report prior to any further action being taken.

Mr. Speaker, the ERC findings for each university, followed by how each institution has responded. The ERC commended the FNU for its strong emphasis on practical training, its commitment to teaching quality and its engagement with industry partners. However, it also raised several critical concerns.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, governance was identified as a major area of weakness; gaps in leadership and strategic planning limiting the university's sustainable growth. The ERC also highlighted serious funding constraints, including ongoing budget cuts and inability in securing external revenue. These constraints have impacted innovation in teaching, research capacity and the development of physical infrastructure.

Furthermore, the ERC found a significant disconnect between the FNU's academic programmes and industry expectations. Programme reviews were often conducted without sufficient industry input, resulting in a skills gap among graduates, particularly in technical, vocational and educational (TVET) areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in its formal response, FNU strongly challenged the findings of the ERC report. The FNU claimed that that report lacked objectivity and was based on innuendo and hearsay with sweeping conclusions presented without adequate supporting evidence. It also stated that comments made regarding the Vice-Chancellor, Pro-Chancellor, Deans and Senior Management were defamatory. The University questioned the credibility of the report, pointing to the lack of terms of reference and an undefined methodological framework. Mr. Speaker, Sir, FNU has, therefore, rejected the report in its current form, stating that it serves no useful purpose in driving its institutional development.

As for the University of the South Pacific, the ERC acknowledged USP's effort to align its academic programmes with labour market demands. The University has established programme advisory committees for each programme, including industry representatives, who regularly contribute to curriculum development.

The ERC also noted the inclusion of practical components, such as industrial attachments in engineering, tourism and hotel management, along with guest lecturers by industry professionals. The Committee commended USP for achieving several international accreditations, such as the reaccreditation of its Tourism and Hospitality Management Programme by the International Centre of Excellence in Tourism and Hospitality Education (THE-ICE) in 2024, and professional recognition for engineering and accounting programmes.

Despite these strengths, the ERC pointed out several areas needing improvements. The curriculum in many programmes was found to be outdated and unresponsive to the evolving post-COVID environment, particularly in adapting the balance between online and in-person delivery. The Committee recommended that USP revise its course content and descriptions to better reflect industry needs and enhance the practical application of learning.

The ERC further proposed that external programme reviews should be held more frequently - every three years for new programmes and every five years for existing ones, rather than the current seven-year cycle. USP is also encouraged to enhance collaboration with other universities, particularly Fiji National University and the University of Fiji, to minimise programme duplication and sharpen its unique academic profile.

In its response, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the USP expressed strong disagreements with the ERC's conclusions. The USP described the report as methodologically weak, substantively inconsistent and professionally inadequate. The University contended that the report's conclusion contrast sharply with the evaluations from globally respected accredited agencies, and ignored the University's current reforms and strategic intent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, USP emphasised that it is undergoing a well-documented externally validated transformation, one that is centred on students, promotes research excellence, strengthens regional integration and enhances institutional resilience. The University believes that this evidence-based trajectory stands in stark contrast to what it describes as the speculative and poorly substantive claims of the ERC.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the University of Fiji, the ERC found that while the University of Fiji has developed strong foundations in certain niche areas, particularly in its MBBS and nursing programmes, there are several structural and academic challenges requiring urgent attention. The Committee recommended that programme structures be reviewed to ensure that, at least, 50 percent to 60 percent of course content is subject specific. This would better align programmes with labour market expectations and equip students with relevant expertise. The Committee also found that many course descriptions were outdated. It is recommended that all course outlines be modernised to clearly articulate intended learning outcomes, industry relevance and skills development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a key recommendation was to expand practical learning components across all programmes. This includes increasing the number of internship and industry partnership to enhance hands-on experience and graduate employability.

To ensure quality assurance, the Committee advised that University of Fiji implement a structured five-year cycle of external programme reviews. This would support continuous improvement and uphold academic standards.

The ERC further encouraged, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the University to collaborate with other national universities to reduce programme duplication and create a distinctive academic identity, particularly in areas such as law and tourism.

In relation to industry integration, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee proposed establishing one more industrial advisory committee, and enhancing intensive opportunities to align learning more closely with real-world demands.

While the University of Fiji recognises the challenges outlined, it took a more constructive approach in its response. The University of Fiji acknowledged minor factual errors, but accepted the report in good faith, and is now working towards its full implementation. Its planning committee and council are currently developing a 12-month implementation roadmap.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the way forward and timeline, the Higher Education Commission Fiji is currently holding detailed consultation with the two Universities that have rejected the ERC Report. The Commission has also engaged an independent audit of the report, which is expected to be completed between September and November 2025. The final report, including all findings and university responses, will be made available.

In conclusion, the Fiji Higher Education Commission is now under the new management and we congratulate the new director, Dr. Eci Naisele, on his appointment. A lot is expected out of the Fiji Higher Education Commission, and we are optimistic they will work closely with all higher education providers to ensure accountability and responsiveness to the ever evolving education sector.

I also have this time to thank the Universities that were reviewed and assure them that the Ministry of Education is here to assist them to carry out the important roles that they play, which is to educate Fiji's higher education students for our workforce. This exercise is a good way of establishing the credibility, market relevance and reliability of courses offered by higher education institutions.

It is the Ministry of Education's intention to engage the Fiji Higher Education Commission to also review other higher education institution providers in Fiji, following this review, to meet the desired outcomes of the thematic areas of the Denarau Declaration, resulting from the Education Summit held in 2023 in Denarau.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for education for providing an update on the Higher Education Commission and the external review of the three major Universities in Fiji, namely the University of South Pacific, Fiji National University and the University of Fiji.

The appointment of the five-member University Review Committee by the Higher Education Commission Fiji was done on 5th November, 2023. According to the honourable Minister for Education, the Review Committee was based on consultation and recommendations of the Higher Education Commission Fiji, in line with the Higher Education Act 2008.

On 22nd November, 2023, I expressed my concern on the composition of expertise of the External Review Committee. I also expressed my concerns on the qualification and experience of the members. External reviews, no doubt, are good intentions for tertiary education in nation building. The purpose of the University Review Committee was to assess and evaluate the overall performance, progress and the quality of the university, including its educational programmes, faculties, facilities and administrative processes.

The External Review Committee was to ensure that the University is meeting its educational objectives and maintaining academic standards, to make recommendations for improvements and changes. The independent evaluation of universities, no doubt, is important to ensure a high quality education is provided to our tertiary students at the universities. The University review should take place to ensure that the institution remains aligned with its goals and objectives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, concerns have emerged over delays and the integrity of the review report of Fiji's three major universities. The Chair should be responsible for the quality of the report. It is very disappointing to note that our University of Fiji is referred as University of Florida and many other issues in the report. If they cannot get the basics right, we can understand not only the honourable Minister's concerns, but also the concerns of Vice-Chancellors from the Universities.

The External Review Committee was set up in 2023 by Higher Education Commission Fiji, and now it is almost two years and the review report is not ready. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Higher Education Commission Fiji is to be partly responsible for the delay in the release of the review report that we are faced by today. They regulate quality and relevance in the country. I want to ask the honourable Minister to first review the effectiveness and performance of Higher Education Commission Fiji, and see that they are operating within their mandate. Higher Education Commission Fiji is asking higher education institutions for their annual reports and strategic plans but my question is, does the Higher Education Commission Fiji have a current strategic plan?

The forthcoming final report from the External Review Committee tasked by Higher Education Commission Fiji to evaluate the three Universities was anticipated to be completed by June 2024. This initiative is crucial as it aims to assess the quality of academic programmes against established quality assurance standards.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Members. That brings us to the end of the Ministerial Statements.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Protecting Fiji's Trade Interests and Economy from Shocks (Question No. 128/2025)

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU asked the Government, upon notice:

In light of the changing landscape of world trade and WTO rules-based trade, can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications inform Parliament on what are the forward plans for Fiji in protecting its trade interests and its economy from the anticipated shocks, especially in light of our vulnerability as a developing country?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his very timely question. It is without argument that with trade rules changing rapidly and shifting rapidly and the global tensions that prevail in the world at the moment, and disasters like climate change, the need to ensure that we have a forward looking approach in terms of our trade posture which is critical.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think if we reflect on when we began as the People's Coalition Government, I hope the Members on the other side would have picked up that we were forward looking from the very beginning in terms of how we looked at dealing with trade in Fiji. For us, to genuinely try and diversify

trade, Fiji had to, firstly, genuinely start diversifying its economy, and that has been a preoccupation of this side of the House since we came into government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of where we are headed, certainly at the moment, the House should be aware that we are currently pushing hard on the Mahogany Bill, and that will open up significant trading opportunities. We even have interested investors that are ready to jump on the bandwagon, as it were, as soon as the Bill is formalised.

I will talk about *kava*, as I have mentioned continuously in this House and including the late Minister for Agriculture. *Kava* is a potential billion dollar industry for the Pacific and we have been taking steps there to refine the Kava Policy through the Ministry of Agriculture and, hopefully, before the end of the year, reintroduce the Bill that was never passed in this House - the Kava Bill, and that again, will continue the opportunities that we have not unlocked in kava.

On top of that, Mr. Speaker, we are interacting actively with the European Union (EU), the Government of Australia and also the United Kingdom (UK), to see whether we can allow the commercial export of kava, particularly into the EU and UK. With Australia, we are, on a temporary basis, trading into Australia and we are hoping that that can be finalised soon.

Of course, as I have said, Mr. Speaker, in terms of commercial agriculture, Fiji Water is beginning their commercial agricultural initiatives in Fiji, a couple of other large investment announcements to be made this year and we are now focusing as well on commercial aquaculture.

Mr. Speaker, in order for us to actually genuinely trade externally, we need to have broader offerings from Fiji. Apart from that we continue to push turmeric and ginger into the US market and also from our country's specific perspective, we are starting to engage opportunities with other countries and I thought I just mention a few.

Firstly, this House will recall that I spoke here about the Interim Economic Partnership Agreement with the European Union and the need to secure global sourcing derogation to allow seafood processors to source from other nations around the Pacific, and then export under preferential arrangements. That is now approved, Mr. Speaker. So, potentially, PAFCO, which I understand has about 40 percent of excess capacity or idle capacity, can use that capacity to start exports into the EU as soon as we find market partners.

Mr. Speaker, as part of the EU initiative and the fact that we are engaging as well with the EU, there is a major investor forum happening in Denarau in September. They will bring around about 200 businesses and potential investors from the EU and the French Territories of New Caledonia and Tahiti, to come and interact with businesses in Fiji. That will genuinely create opportunity to diversify trade. That has only happened because of the deepening engagement that this side of the House has started with the European Union.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of other countries, we are engaging with the United Arab Emirates. At the PIFS Trade Ministers Meeting held recently at the PIFS Headquarters, we had initiated discussions of interim economic partnership agreement on a regional basis with the Pacific. That is a priority for the honourable Prime Minister and this side of the House, and we will be working very closely with PIFS to ensure that this agreement comes into being because of the potential export opportunities to the UAE, but more so, the Arabian countries that are watching those developments closely.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also it goes without saying that from the UAE opportunity, there is a potential to get more foreign direct investment through their sovereign wealth funds in that country.

Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, other areas of opportunity, we are focusing a bit on the Pacific over the last 12 months. We have visited Papua New Guinea and Tonga, and we are about to go into Vanuatu, Cook Islands and Samoa possibly this year and, again, we believe that as part of broadening out our trade, we should not take our eyes off our region. There are tremendous opportunities in our region. In fact, from the PNG Trade Visit, we are having a trade visit from the Deputy Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea later this month from 19th to 23rd August, 2025. He is bringing a trade delegation from Papua New Guinea into Fiji, seeking opportunities. Our two-way trade is only \$40 million, Mr. Speaker. There are some big opportunities there, and we will be exploring them in depth when they do arrive into Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, there is also some work that has been done on the MSG free trade agreement and we also believe that some of our island countries have not ratified PICTA, such as Tonga, and we are encouraging them to ratify, because that will then allow them to get dutyfree access into Fiji products.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, as part of all these initiatives, we are focussing on ease of doing business as well. I have mentioned some of the initiatives before, but just very quickly, Mr. Speaker, the focus at the moment is on a single window for trading that will simplify business processes. We are also looking at the automation of the building permits approvals and some other approvals. We are also looking at the e-commerce strategy and encouraging more activity amongst the small to medium businesses, and trying to find pathways for them into external markets, particularly in terms of some of our niche products.

Mr. Speaker, I thank honourable Koroilavesau for the question, and I hope that in my brief explanation, it would adequately advise the House on how we are genuinely broadening out Fiji's trade opportunities so that we can optimise the opportunities in the not-too-distant future.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, just a quick question to the honourable Minister; have we explored the avenue of trying to get some of our goods, especially our fruits and vegetables, out to Singapore?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, there had been some discussions, but one of the things, certainly, from my perspective is our inability to develop things at commercial scale. That is a big preoccupation for us at the moment, working together with the Ministry of Agriculture to try and identify some products that we can deliver at scale. For example, Japan used to take our pawpaw in the 1980s and that has, kind of, gone for some reason, so we are trying to redevelop commercial agriculture at scale, and then be able to seriously make offerings into some of those key markets, because there are genuine opportunities for us, but unless we are able to actually have the right infrastructure, scale and quality, we will find the same result as we have in the past. We will start, and then it will come to an abrupt halt, so it is an area of interest.

In fact, I did not mention it, but Southeast Asia is a major area of interest for Fiji. The honourable Prime Minister has tasked me to explore looking at APEC membership, because with that we can get access to the 750 million market. But again, for Fiji to seriously play in that market, we need to develop genuine commercial agricultural product, and that is what we have been trying to do so that when we are well positioned, we can make some genuine offerings into those countries.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I invite honourable Kumar and honourable Sharma, I invite you, honourable Members, if you can join me in welcoming the Minister for Justice from the New Zealand Parliament, honourable Paul Goldsmith, who joins us in the gallery. You are most welcome to the Fijian Parliament, honourable Minister. Thank you for joining us this afternoon.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question to the honourable Minister regarding biosecurity issues the country is facing when it comes to export of our food, fruits and vegetables, how are you addressing this issue? You can have commercial agriculture, but if you do not deal with the

biosecurity issues, we will not be able to send our food.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, yes, biosecurity has been a challenge, as we know historically, in terms of gaining access. Through the leadership of the honourable Prime Minister, what Cabinet did was restructure Biosecurity and make it report into Agriculture so that they can do things a bit better. We have just had one experience over the last couple of days where we have been able to create access for ghee very quickly, simply by the Ministry of Agriculture collaborating a little closer with Trade and also Biosecurity. I think there are some good signs there from that small restructure or reorganisation and that augurs well in the future. Like most things, it is about trying to collaborate better.

I think under the new structure, going forward, we will get better outcomes. For example, for FIJI Water to come to Fiji, they needed to bring new plant material because they are looking at doing citrus in Fiji, which means that, hopefully, over time, we will have more locally produced juices in our hotels. They did that quite seamlessly with Biosecurity. I think there is a bit more collaboration happening, which is very positive. I am sure with the leadership of the new Minister, we will continue to unlock some of these bottlenecks that you have mentioned, honourable Kumar.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a very important question and very critical for Fiji at this point. It is understood that when businesses does well, the country's economy does well, and so does every Fijian.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is understood that looking at domestic taxes, looking at global tariffs, what our business or nation can do is to ramp up its volume of production. The question to the honourable Minister is, whether he is going to relook at some of the incentives that assist small SMEs, locally owned SMEs, for their export capabilities. Secondly, it is a suggestion that the incorporation of technology and innovation which leads to value adding, if an innovation summit can be hosted in the coming months or years, where it involves a lot of stakeholders, a lot of youth who are graduating. I know the YES Programme has allocated \$300,000 for the youth, so I believe more collaboration with the graduates and the Government as a whole. Your thoughts on that, honourable Minister.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think that was a suggestion and not probably a question. But I will answer it anyway, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because it is a valid observation. Currently, we are finding that the current grant structures are quite adequate and effective. It is allowing for more mechanisation in agriculture as well as us and rural development, in a way, sort of pushing that hard. Looking at innovation in agriculture, certainly the overlay of 5G will bring in opportunities, but again, that sort of a work in progress.

In terms of innovation, we do have the National Exporter Scheme (NES) and also the Young Entrepreneur Scheme (YES) that encourages innovation and export orientation. But I will take on board your idea of innovation, and we will see whether we can do something in that space. It will augur well for this new journey that we are trying to undertake to commercialise agriculture and aquaculture in Fiji.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I like it when the honourable Deputy Prime Minister stated he is always forward-looking. My concern is knowing where he comes from. There are a lot of crabs in Dravo, they look forward, but they move sideways.

(Laughter)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU. - A simple question to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, you have talked about mahogany and niche markets. One thing that is hindering our access to niche markets when it comes to mahogany is the certification process. I want to know whether that has been completed, or at what stage is it, in terms of getting that proper certification so that we can access niche markets?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.— It is probably an appropriate question for the Minister for Forestry, but yes, the certification of the Mahogany forest is underway. I think probably another six months away, or 12 months away, but it is underway. We felt that if we could start the legislation going, by the time we enact the legislation, the certification will be ready.

Certification right now will be useful for markets like New Zealand, particularly the decking market. There are markets in the US that are already being assessed at the moment. However, having the Bill will allow for better commercialisation of mahogany and, more importantly, the involvement of the landowners in the industry.

Ratification of the Beijing Convention and Protocol
(Question No. 98/2025)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation update Parliament on the status of Fiji ratifying the Beijing Convention, Beijing Protocol and the Montreal Convention?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA. - Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. I rise to bring attention to this august House a long-standing gap in our alignment with international civil aviation standards.

The Beijing Convention and the Beijing Protocol were established in 2010, followed by the adoption of the Montreal Convention in 2014 by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO.) According to ICAO, the member States are generally expected to ratify such instruments within two to five years of their adoption to maintain alignment with global aviation norms, particularly in the areas of passenger protection and aviation security.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are talking about 2010 and 2014 here and regrettably, no substantive progress was made towards the ratification of these vital instruments. As a result, Fiji has been out of step with international aviation standards, particularly in addressing emerging threats to aviation security and modernising our security legal framework.

The Coalition Government has taken decisive steps to correct that lapse. The process of ratification of ICAO instruments is a priority of the Coalition Government and my Ministry and I wish to assure the House that the process of Fiji's accession with its key international instruments is being progressed. We fully recognise the rigorous and multi-step nature of this process, but we are committed to progressing this process this year.

In addition to prioritising these three instruments for ratification, I am pleased to report the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation is also advancing the ratification of tourism protocols, namely, the 2006 amendments of article 50(a) and 56 of the Convention on Civil Aviation. This has been approved by the Cabinet. These amendments aim to enhance ICAO's institutional structure under the ICAO framework, demonstrating our steadfast commitment to upholding international aviation standards and strengthening Fiji's global standing in the sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to briefly highlight the significance of the three pending instruments. The Beijing Convention strengthens the international legal regime by addressing emerging threats to civil aviation, including the use of aircraft as weapons and the unlawful transport of weapons of mass destruction. To put this context into reality, the relevant example is the Ryanair Flight FR 4978 incident in Belarus in May 2021, where a passenger jet was diverted under false pretence by an act highly regarded

as unlawful interference. While the incident was condemned, the lack of a specific international legal framework for such situations hampered a more robust response. The Beijing Convention aims to fill this gap.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Beijing Protocol expands the scope of aircraft hijacking offences to include new forms of interference, such as cyber-attacks on aircraft systems. It builds upon the 1970 Hague Convention by addressing threats that were not envisaged under earlier legal frameworks, including remote hijacking and other forms of technically enabled sabotage.

The Montreal Convention replaces outdated provisions of the Warsaw System, and establishes a uniform legal framework for airline liability in cases of passenger injury or death, baggage loss and delays, offering greater protection to travellers and improved clarity for operators. The Convention is already in force in over 141 countries, including Fiji's major international aviation partners. These conventions are essential to strengthening and enhancing protections for passengers and operators in international air transport.

Furthermore, this work will be aligned with a broader national effort to strengthen air security. The combined effect of these initiatives will be a stronger, more coordinated national security framework, of which civil aviation is a critical part. Once ratified and supported by the necessary legislation, these conventions will directly address current legal gaps in aviation security and reinforce Fiji's commitment to international security cooperation under the ICAO framework. The Government remains firmly committed to delivering this outcome.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I think this is a convenient point to suspend our proceedings for lunch. Parliament proceedings is suspended. We will resume at 2.30 p.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.27 p.m.

The House resumed at 2.35 p.m.

Policy on School Placements
(Question No. 110/2025)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Education inform Parliament on the current policy on school placements and the measures being undertaken to ensure families can access schools close to their residence?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, can I get clarification from the honourable Member on whether he is referring to pre-enrollment or post-enrollment placement?

HON. V. LAL.- This is the zoning system where it is either both, pre and post.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- According to pre-enrolment of a student, that is stipulated in section 3 of the Education Act, where the child goes to school is by the wishes of the parents.

HON. J. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, the school zoning policy was repealed in 2023. That allowed parents to enroll their children in any school. In some cases, the students travel very long distances for long hours to reach to and from school. My question to the honourable Minister is, does the Ministry of Education have monitoring mechanisms to find out how the long hours of travelling is impacting students, and how many students are travelling more than 30 kilometres a day?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have just mentioned that the enrolment of a student is according to the parents' wishes. In terms of travelling of students, we are aware that some students travel far, because that is the only school that is available in that particular area.

So in terms of monitoring, I think the honourable Member is fully aware, as a former executive officer of the Ministry of Education, there is a system, the FEMIS system. We encourage and implore on the heads of school to update on a regular basis where attendance of students are monitored, and also the attendance of teachers and heads of school.

Malau Port – Forward Operating Base
(Question No. 112/2025)

HON. J.N. NAND asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Defence and Veteran Affairs inform Parliament on the details regarding access given to the RFMF Naval Division to Malau Port in Labasa as a Forward Operating Base?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for this question. In October 2023, the Fiji Naval Division re-established the Forward Operating Base (FOB) in Labasa with 20 personnel comprised of composite elements within the Navy, working on a 12- week rotation cycle. The main objective of the FOB is to enhance visibility and deterrence for maritime law enforcement through joint operations that are conducted with the Fiji Police, Customs, Ministry of Fisheries and Maritime Surveillance Authority of Fiji (MSAF).

The leveraging on the current resources and infrastructure of the RFMF base in Labasa, the deployment of the FOB was made possible and is currently being utilised as a temporary FOB

headquarters and a support base.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in January of this year, the Republic of Fiji Military Forces and the Fiji Pine Limited entered into an agreement and signed a MoU for the use of the Malau Port facility in Labasa as a forward operating base and for various naval operations. The agreement also establishes a close co-operation between the RFMF and the FTL for security and sustaining its flying operations, which not only contributes to sustainable economic development initiatives, but also supports Fiji's overall National Development Plans and interests.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the MoU, which is for an initial term of five years, may be mutually renewed for additional periods, grants through the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, access to the Malau Port facility where they can utilize the port as a staging and embarkation port for naval vessels, for the re-supply and logistical support, a port for the sustainment of naval operations and continuous presence within Fiji's territorial waters.

Accessibility to the Malau Port also allows the RFMF to utilise the facility for training, exercises and activities in support of national security and of maritime operations. Presence of the RFMF forces in Malau Port is about operational reach and increasing footprint.

It also allows the RFMF Naval Division to implement a strategy in supporting other agencies in maritime law enforcement through detection, disruption and deterrence of illegal activities. The response times during maritime security incidents and in maritime safety incidents such as search and rescue will be faster. Regular engagement with the locals also provides a better understanding of the area of operations and eventually helps shape the operational tempo. Additionally, it allows the Fiji Navy to work closely with partner agencies in the area and better understand how they operate and how they can complement and support each other effectively.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in times of HADR, the access given at Malau Port provides a staging point for the RFMF response teams and allows the preposition of RFMF assets and support elements in times of an impending cyclone or disaster. The location of the FOB also allows further growth, given the available space and potential for the area with a relatively wide passage to the berths that allows naval vessels to navigate out of the area during day and night. Furthermore, the proximity of Labasa also supports the sustainment of navy operations, which is critical for any forward operating base. It is also in a relatively secure area, which is an essential part of the FOB. However, minor work will still need to be undertaken to enhance the physical security of the base.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the concept of the forward operating base has allowed the Fiji Navy to work alongside its partners Fiji Police Force, Ministry of Fisheries, Fiji Revenue & Customs Service, Ministry of Immigration, provincial officers and Maritime Surveillance Authority of Fiji in a joint environment. And moreover, despite the challenges within the operating environment with resources, mobility and platform accessibility, the joint operations have brought about confidence in the local community and a sense of shared responsibility and collaboration among the maritime security stakeholders in the North.

UAE Red Crescent Authority and Republic of Fiji
(Question No. 113/2025)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Education update Parliament on the Cooperation Agreement between the United Arab Emirates Red Crescent Authority and the Republic of Fiji?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. The Emirates Red Crescent (ERC) was established in 1983 under the leadership of His Excellency Sheikh Hamad bin Zayed Al Nahyan who has become a global leader in humanitarian work, guided by the mission to mobilize the power of humanity to assist the vulnerable, regardless of ethnicity, culture, geography or religion. This ERC mandate has made significant contributions to Fiji, post-disaster recovery and education development following the devastation caused by *TC Winston* in 2016.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) led by the Executive Director of the Crown Prince Court, Mr. Salem Al-Nayed, visited Fiji in April 2017 and 2019, the UAE through Red Crescent Authority have already assisted the three newly established schools which includes Muaira Methodist College, Ratu Simone Matanitobua College and Sigatoka Methodist College with a sum of \$6.3 million for the construction of 1 x 5 classroom, 1 x 4 special rooms (science laboratory, computer room, IA room and a home economics room) canteen, ablution block and administration block.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to inform this august House that as of 1st Friday, 2025, all approved and stamped structural drawings for the proposed 2 x 2 Duplex Teachers Quarters for Ratu Simone Matanitobua College, Sigatoka Methodist College and Muaira Methodist College have been submitted and received by the UAE Red Crescent Authority and UAE has informed the Ministry to finalise the selection of contractors through the tender process. This progress has been made possible through close collaboration with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Fiji Embassy in Abu Dhabi.

The agreement for the implementation of Phase 2 of the UAE Red Crescent Project which was endorsed by Cabinet on 20th June, 2025 will be formalised through a virtual signing ceremony. The date and time for this ceremony will be mutually agreed upon and confirmed by the UAE Red Crescent Authority and the process of appointment of the contractor will be undertaken jointly. The Ministry remains committed to ensuring that this partnership delivers the intended benefits for our teachers and schools in Fiji.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, around 2022, there was a discussion with UAE to seek assistance in the area of digital education. In other words they would be assisting us with digital tools particularly in subject areas where we have shortage of teachers. So, we had started some discussion in that area. I would just like to ask the honourable Minister if there is any progress on that or that particular initiative has been dropped.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, the initiatives, if there is one will be explored should there be any further discussions to be continued with the UAE post-Phase 2 of the project.

MOU - Korean National Police Agency and Fiji Police Force
(Question No. 114/2025)

HON. I. TUIWAILEVU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Policing update Parliament on the Memorandum of Understanding between the Korean National Police Agency and the Fiji Police Force?

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to inform and provide an update of the agreement between the Fijian Police Force (FPF) and the Korean National Police Agency (KNPA) which was approved in Cabinet on 24th June of this year. The Ministry, so far at this point, has conveyed this decision through diplomatic channels to the Korean Government and we are anticipating formalising this agreement in the coming months.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, by way of background, Fiji and Korea first established a diplomatic relationship 54 years ago and this is the first partnership that the Fiji Police Force has formally engaged with its counterpart in Korea, having been first discussed in 2022. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) creates opportunities for the Fiji Police Force to collaborate with the Korean National Police Agency in enhancing security co-operation. This partnership not only will improve Fiji's capacity to combat crime, but also foster stronger relationship between Korea and Fiji.

What are some of these benefits, Mr. Speaker? The Korean National Police Agency has affiliated institutions that include a few that I am going to mention now:

- Korean National Police University;
- Police Human Resources Development Institute;
- Central Police Academy;
- Korean Police Investigation Academy;
- National Police Hospital; and
- the most important one for us is the Cybercrime Unit.

It has good capabilities. This is an opportunity for our Police Force to utilise and maximise their capabilities as part of the officers' exchange, and also to receive professional training.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this point, we look forward to engaging the Korean National Police Agency, and we are working on what we call an implementation plan. But the overall idea behind this engagement is really to enlarge and expand our international engagement with professional organisations like the Korean National Police Agency.

Nabouwalu-Labasa and Savusavu Highway
(Question No.115/2025)

HON. F.S. KOYA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management update Parliament on the work programme for this year to repair the Nabouwalu to Labasa and the Savusavu Highway?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, regarding Nabouwalu to Labasa and Savusavu Highway, in response the Nabouwalu to Labasa corridor, the work will focus in this financial year on the targeted resealing of critical sections along the 70 kilometres stretch from Nabouwalu to Dreketi, prioritizing specific areas that require immediate attention to improve road durability and safety.

The resealing work will not cover the entire length, but will target sections identified as high priority. It is nearly an eight kilometre segment from Matasawalevu Bridge to Naua Bridge will undergo resealing to enhance surface quality and longevity. The programme also includes repair works between Savusavu Junction and Seaqaqa, as well as between Seaqaqa and Labasa aimed at addressing surface deterioration and preventing further damage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the Savusavu Highway, aside from ongoing safety improvements under the Na Vualiku programme, the FRA will undertake substantial upgrading works around the S-bend area, hill sections and black spots between Seaqaqa and Savusavu. These upgrades are designed to improve safety, reduce accident-prone zones and facilitate smooth traffic flow.

Upgrading activities along Buca Bay Road from Savusavu Airport towards Nacavanadi, Vatudamu and Kasavu will also continue to enhance access and infrastructure resilience. Additional

works along the Buca Bay Road include various road improvement activities such as rip and pulverise over 10 kilometres of Buca Bay Road, excavation of various road surfaces, footpath construction at Koro Sun Hotel frontage and along the Buca Bay Airport to Nasavusavu Public School. Line marking, resealing and asphalt concrete overlay, over 3.7 kilometres of Buca Bay Road are also scheduled. Other minor but essential works include line marking, tarsealing and footpath constructions at various locations within the Buca Bay area.

Sir, these infrastructure improvements will bring numerous benefits for the people of Vanua Levu and visitors alike, better roads, safe and more reliable travel, reducing the risk of accidents and vehicle damage, improving road surface quality and road resilience which facilitates easy access for remote communities.

In addition, I just wanted to mention there was some concern about the Lomaloma Slip (Transinsular Road), the cross country road between Seaqaqa and Savusavu. Lomaloma Slip site is currently safe and stable, and accessible to all traffic. More upgrading works by Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) this financial year as part of the ongoing routine maintenance works. This is the same status as the Korosomo slip in Tabia on Nabouwalu Road between Seaqaqa and Labasa.

Lomaloma Slip is part of the 40 bridges and replacement and renewable programme for FRA with design and further assessments in progress. Sir, FRA will carry out more geo-technical assessments in the area as part of ongoing investigation before the proposed bridge is in place. The Coalition Government through the Ministry of Works and FRA is also looking at a possible new cross country road from Vunivesi, Nakawaga, Nukubolu Section from Savusavu towards Navakuru to Nakorotari in Labasa as an alternative route for the Lomaloma Slip in the future.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Just a short question, honourable Minister. With all the repair work that has been done, are you going to chip seal or is it going to be similar to what has happened in our Queen's Highway where you laid the tarseal thick? Which version is being used? Chip sealing or thick bitumen that is actually done on most of the highway?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, yes, that is called resealing. The feedback is the nature of the resealing works, it might not be safe or satisfactory, so that is an option that the FRA is looking into.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for the work that is going to go in front of the Koro Sun. There has been a problem for a long time and also the plans for the Lomaloma Slip. For Koroisomo, we had cut an alternative route on top of the hill. Is there any other plan for that particular one, in case it slips again? We have just buried it and done the tarseal over again, but we had cut an alternative route. So, what is the long-term plan for that one near Tabia?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not have the information on that but I will obtain that as soon as I can get it.

MR. SPEAKER.- Information later. Honourable Usamate, are you happy with that?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Yes.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you.

Update on Integrated Rural Development Framework
(Question No. 116/2025)

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management update Parliament on the Integrated Rural Development Framework and what progress has been made to ensure that it effectively addresses the current needs of rural communities?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, please allow me to shed some light on the historical information about the Integrated Rural Development Framework (IRDF). The Integrated Rural Development Framework was endorsed by the Cabinet in 2009 to improve the rural development, planning and coordination system. It was intended to address perceived gaps in terms of the lack of coherence between bottom-up planning priorities that arise at the community level, with policies and priorities at the national level.

The Framework attempted to address the inadequacy of decentralised decision making by reinforcing the Ministry in the rural development machinery with its attendant systems and processes. The IRDF, reiterated the need for a rural development system that was inclusive of all interests and engendered active participation by stakeholders in development planning and implementation. This Framework needs to be reviewed. It has been almost three decades now since the Cabinet endorsed it.

Furthermore, the 2013 Constitution had implications on the application of this Framework, especially in terms of the decision-making process, which is another significant driver for this review. In October 2024, the Ministry embarked on reviewing the Integrated Rural Development Framework. This was made possible through funding support from the UNDP Governance for Resilience Programme. The review was focused on strengthening the planning, programming, coordination and implementation of Fiji's rural development services and programmes.

The review focused on examining the effectiveness of the IRDF, assessing community needs, aspirations and overall development challenges, and the extent of coordination and collaboration among stakeholders. The review has also recommended how integrated rural development can be strengthened, and to inform the National Rural Development Policy. Using quantitative and qualitative research methods, it has spent four months from November 2024 to February 2025.

The review process included document analysis and stakeholder consultation with the workshops, key informant interviews, *talanoa* and online surveys. It is part of an effort to elevate the importance and focus of risk-informed development within the broader context of strengthening climate and disaster resilient development. The Ministry endorsed a change management programme to frame the overall initiative of the review of the Integrated Rural Development Framework 2009, as per the commencement of the Change Management Programme. This was intended to provide perspectives and recommendations that will lead towards the development of the National Rural Development Policy – the first main component of the Change Management Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite the challenges encountered since the 2013 Constitution, the Ministry over the years still operates development planning forums at the divisional level. It still convenes heads of department meetings where discussions with other agencies, and plan development in their respective sectors. These are also forums for monitoring and tracking development project implementation at the regional level, whether it is at the divisional, provincial or district. To ensure the effective implementation of our key development programmes, we also liaise with other agencies. For example, the Rural Housing Assistance Programme Scheme 3, which requires the use of forest resources owned by landowners, the

Ministry partners with the Ministry of Fisheries and Forests for input on the technical aspects of sawmilling and the treatment of timber that will be used for house construction.

Furthermore, one of the villages in Naitasiri, Saumakia, we have implemented bundled assistance, including rural housing assistance and a community access road under the Rural Outer Island Development Programme to ensure that the Government's investment in rural development is impactful in the remote community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to this, when responding to disasters, the whole of Government approach has been our modality of delivery. The honourable Leader of the Opposition is fully aware of this. This was very much in action when the Government responded to community needs during *TC Harold* amidst the COVID-19 operations. In that regard, I must say that even though the IRDF is being reviewed, the principle is already embedded in the legislative mechanism of the National Disaster Risk Management Act 2024.

The implementation of the National Disaster Risk Management Act - certain provisions require the preparation of the Disaster Risk Management Plan for communities. This will require an integrated and partnership approach between Government agencies and the communities. This is why I am saying that the principles of the IRDF are still relevant, although the modality it takes may be different. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to update this House on the importance and effectiveness of the IRDF.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you, honourable Minister, for the explanation and thank you for the progress so far, but the policy has been dormant for a number of years. We understand that the IRDF will inform the formulation of the National Rural Development Policy. Can the honourable Minister inform us of the timeframe for the finalisation of the policy?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- The review of the Integrated Rural Development Framework was undertaken between November 2024 and May 2025, as part of the ministry's ongoing efforts. The review provides critical insights into the current gaps, challenges and opportunities in rural development programming. Importantly, the findings and lessons learned from this review will directly form the formulation of the National Rural Development Policy. In formulating this, the Ministry is adopting a co-creation approach, one that places rural communities, stakeholders and development partners at the centre of the policy development process.

The aim is to ensure that the National Rural Development Policy reflects the real priorities and aspirations, and lived experiences of our rural population. This approach not only builds ownership and accountability but also strengthens the relevance and sustainability of the policy interventions. So, given the extensive work involved in developing NRDP, careful planning and broad-based consultations, we anticipate finalising the policy in 2026.

Utilisation of Rural Housing Allocation (Question No. 117/2025)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management inform Parliament on how the \$3 million rural housing allocation in the 2024-2025 Budget has been utilised?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for the question. The Rural Housing Assistance Programme has been implemented by the Ministry for two years

now, since the Coalition Government made the bold decision to revert the programme to this ministry. Before I provide details on the 2024-2025 utilisation of the \$3 million from the Rural Housing Assistance Budget, please allow me to recap the key details about the programme.

The four Housing Schemes offered under the Rural Housing Assistance Programme are as follows:

- (1) Scheme 1: Including Government assistance to applicants who purchase building materials at a minimum cost of \$30,000. This Government will facilitate the cartage cost of building materials.
- (2) Scheme 2: Requires the applicant to pay one-third contributing in cash, where the military pays two-thirds of the total project costs. The scheme is targeted at individual applicants with the following ongoing options:
 - (i) Newly built house construction using the approved 24 by 16-foot house plan;
 - (ii) Extension of an existing structure, which includes the attachment of sanitation and kitchen facilities.
 - (iii) Retrofitting of existing structures to withstand categories 4 and five tropical cyclones; and
 - (iv) Completion of an existing structure.
- (3) Scheme 3: Mainly targets timber resource owners, either pine schemes, native tree resources owners or lease beneficiary holders who can use these resources as a third contribution. The Ministry works closely with the Ministry of Forestry on this scheme.
- (4) Scheme four, is mainly to assist beneficiaries under the Family Assistance for Social Welfare Housing Schemes.

This Scheme will adopt the same Rural Housing Unit Standard House Plan with additional disability friendly facilities.

This Programme, Mr. Speaker, Sir, prioritises assistance to those who are permanently residing in villages and rural settlements and do not own a home or first-time homeowners whose house was damaged from previous natural disasters and need assistance for new house construction, repair or retrofitting and house extension or completion.

I must say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that for the financial year in question, the Ministry has been able to utilise 97 percent of its \$3 million budget. This is about the same level of achievement when compared to the financial year 2023/2024. With the financial year 2024/ 2025, the Ministry has been able to implement the programme in all four schemes. In the previous year, assistance was only for applications under schemes 2 and 4 due to the zero applications received for Scheme 1.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the total number of projects implemented in the financial year 2024/2025 were approximately 143, of which 33 were in the Central Division, 32 in the Eastern Division, 26 in the Northern Division and 52 in the Western Division.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some variation was noted in each housing scheme when making a comparison to the financial year 2023-2024, due to the Ministry's focus on building new houses over rural housing completion and extension, as well as addressing the increasing number of demands under the Scheme 3 through partnership with resource owners. As for Scheme 3, the total number of projects implemented increased by more than 80 percent. This trend is expected to continue in the next financial year, 2025 to 2026.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after completing two financial years of implementation, the Ministry has identified areas of the programme, continuous improvements, and a paper will be discussed by Cabinet shortly to discuss some proposed recommendations for the programme going forward. This is to ensure that the objectives of the programme are realised and key challenges identified are addressed as the programme evolved over the last three years.

I must note with appreciation the support in the new budget for additional positions for the Rural Housing Unit, which will certainly boost the Ministry's capacity for fast-tracking the implementation of the Rural Housing Assistance Programme, as well as other related programmes such as the repairs and maintenance of Government quarters when the need arises and technical support for retrofitting of communal buildings such as evacuation centres.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry with an allocated budget of \$2.93 million is targeting to implement around 141 projects in the current financial year 2025/2026 in the estimated breakdown of possible projects as follows:

- Central Division 33 with \$772,311;
- Eastern Division 33 with \$463,000;
- Northern Division 25 with \$772,000; and
- Western Division 50 with \$926,774, which brings the total of \$2,934,783.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is doing its best to assist our rural Fijians in having better standards and safe houses to live in, in our villages and rural communities through its Rural Housing Assistance Programme as per its annual budgetary allocation. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to shed some light on the progress of the Rural Housing Assistance Programme.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Thank you, honourable Minister for the response and the work undertaken is most appreciated. For those who will be interested in the current year's allocation. Is there a timeframe for them to submit their application requests, and what is the process they need to go through?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on our website, we have publicised that we have the links that they can click on and we have online forms. We also have our divisional offices where our DOs and ADOs who also have the paper forms, if they do not have any online access, who can assist them with the applications. What we have advised our people in the rural communities when we go to visit them is, you need to apply as soon as possible, rather than wait for the second half of the financial year. We know things are starting to dry up by that time. So we ask them to do it as soon as possible.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister mentioned that there are four schemes in place, and I would like to know, out of the four schemes, which one is more in demand from the public? And how do you ensure that people who are applying for this assistance, particularly under the First Home Grant, are genuine applications, meaning that they do not own anything else? How do you verify that?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- The *turaga ni koro* to endorse it, and they have to verify if this person is living in the village and if this is the first homeowner. If they do not tick the box, then that application does not progress. I am sorry, what was the second part of your question?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- The question was, out of the four schemes, which one is more in demand?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- I believe scheme three, where you need to have forest resources. We are going to go to Gau very soon, I think in like a night. We are going to commission nine houses that have

been completed. It has to be five houses or more if you have forest resources to apply for this programme. But that is the one that people go after the most.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Sir, one follow-up question. The honourable Minister mentioned that it is the *Roko Tui* who endorses.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- The *Turaga ni Koro*.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- So *Turaga ni Koro* endorses that, but how do you ensure that that person does not own any house outside the village or settlement in any other place? Why I am asking this question because I have led that Ministry and I know the problems that exist.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- I thank the honourable Kumar for the question. Yes, that is always a risk that can happen. We can only rely on the officials on the ground, and if there is any hanky-panky by some people, we also have other layers of checks and balances in place. So the *Turaga ni Koro*, we also have the District Officer, the *Roko Tui* and the *Mata ni Tikina* who knows everyone. If someone is playing around with the system, that is very quickly found out

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, it is a very good initiative, just because cyclones are not taking down our homes, termites are, and it is a growing problem. The question to the honourable Minister is, with the four schemes that are mentioned here, is there encouragement for the incorporation of solar-powered modern homes and pre-fabricated houses that are portable and climate-resilient in our rural areas?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- I would like to thank the honourable Sharma for the question. You might have heard from the answer that I gave that we were going to push through Cabinet some adjustments in the policy. That includes the very thing you are raising, the solarisation, and also addressing the effect of ACT termites. That is part of the new Cabinet paper we are going to be pushing through.

National Security Strategy 2025-2029
(Question No. 118/2025)

HON. I. KURIDRANI asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Defence and Veteran Affairs update Parliament on the National Security Strategy 2025-2029 (NSS) and how it is guiding Government policies, strengthening inter-agency coordination, and addressing Fiji's key security threats?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I attempt to answer the question by the honourable Member, I would just like to say that the honourable Prime Minister will be launching the National Security Strategy (NSS) next week Tuesday, at 11.30 a.m. in Novotel in Lami. The question that has been raised with me is related to this document that I have here.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Security Strategy 2025-2029, which was endorsed by Cabinet on 4th June, 2025, is intended as the capstone strategic policy for Fiji's national security sector. It will sit alongside Fiji's National Development Plan and Foreign Policy White Paper as the three guiding strategies outlining government's development, foreign policy and national security priorities and approaches.

The role of the NSS includes the following:

- Define Fiji's national security priorities by articulating Fiji's national security objectives and identify priority threats and challenges.

- Guide Government policy and decision making by setting policy direction, allowing resources and efforts to be directed to national security priorities.
- Strengthen whole of government and whole of nation approaches by promoting inter-agency coordination and more cohesive security architecture
- Enhance civil-military relations by reinforcing democratic oversight and defining roles and responsibilities in the security sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the NSS also proposes three overarching national security aims:

- (1) Protect - this is to safeguard Fiji's people, values, sovereignty and assets, both tangible and intangible, against internal and external threats.
- (2) Progress - that is to foster national development, economic prosperity and social stability, ensuring a secure and resilient future for all Fijians ; and
- (3) Promote - meaning to contribute to regional stability and global security, reinforcing Fiji's role as a responsible and proactive member of the international community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to meet these aims, the strategy proposes adopting a national security policy of constructive engagement. Underpinning this policy is the idea that Fiji must find its security in collaboration with others and through engagement of all sectors of Fiji's community. It is characterised by a pragmatic approach to addressing both traditional and emerging security challenges while also promoting regional cooperation and global engagement.

These traditional and emerging security threats include:

- (1) Transnational crime including drug, human and arms trafficking;
- (2) Cyber threats (both state-based and criminal);
- (3) Climate change and environmental crimes, social fracturing and loss of trust in government, economic security including economic coercion and critical infrastructure vulnerabilities; and
- (4) Military intervention in politics.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in order to strengthen inter-agency coordination and address Fiji's key security threats, the NSS proposes reforms to Fiji's national security architecture and outlines the clear demarcation of roles and responsibilities of key agencies. Moreover as a first step, the NSS recommends reforming the National Security Council (NSC) to include select Cabinet Ministers advised by relevant senior security officials.

These reforms will better align the NSC with democratic principles by having key national security decisions made by democratically elected representatives. The Government will explore legislation to clarify the role, composition, powers and functions of the NSC and thoroughly consult with the people of Fiji on these reforms.

To guide coordination in the national security sector, the NSS also recommends establishing a Senior Officials Committee (SOC) on national security, in line with the recommendation of the Foreign Policy White Paper. The SOC will comprise the permanent secretaries of relevant national security ministries plus the Commissioner of Police and the Commander of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF). The SOC will serve as the primary forum for providing coordinated advice from the civil service and discipline forces to government on national security and foreign policy matters in implementing the Government's directive.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with effect from 1st August, 2025, the responsibility of the National Security

Strategy and coordinating the relevant advisory shall now come under the purview of the Office of the Prime Minister. Furthermore, my Ministry will continue to provide the support and guidance required for the effective coordination and implementation of the Fiji National Security Strategy.

Written Questions

Class Roll of More Than 30 Students (Question No. 119/2025)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Education inform Parliament on the number of classrooms in primary schools that have a class roll of more than 30 students in a classroom?

¹ HON. A.M. RADRODRO. - Mr. Speaker, Sir, I table my response according to Standing Orders.

Recipients of Pilot Tourism MSME Grant Fund (Question No. 120/2025)

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation inform Parliament on the number of recipients who benefitted from the Pilot Tourism MSME Grant Fund announced in December 2024 and the criteria used to determine eligibility and allocation?

² HON. V.R. GAVOKA. - Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am happy to table my response.

2024 Visitor Arrivals Compared to pre-COVID-19 (Question No. 121/2025)

HON. I. KURIDRANI asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation provide a country-by-country breakdown of visitor arrivals to Fiji in 2024, and indicate how these figures compare to pre-COVID levels in 2019?

³ HON. V.R. GAVOKA. - Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have my response here.

BILLS - FIRST READING

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 84, I move:

That the Employment Relations (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Bill No. 27/2025), be now read for the first time.

¹ Editor's Note: Reply to Written Question No. 119/2025 tabled by the honourable Minister for Education, under Standing Order 45(3), is appended as Annexure I.

² Reply to Written Question No. 120/2025 tabled by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation, under Standing Order 45(3), is appended as Annexure II.

³ Reply to Written Question No. 121/2025 tabled by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation, under Standing Order 45(3), is appended as Annexure III.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion.

(Four copies of the Bill handed to the Secretary-General)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, in accordance with Standing Order 84(1), the Bill has now been read the first time. The Bill will now be listed on the Order Paper and set down for hearing on Friday, 8th August, 2025.

Honourable Members, given that the second reading of the Bill is scheduled for tomorrow (Friday), I encourage all honourable Members to study and examine the Bill and prepare accordingly, noting that the second reading will primarily focus on the principles and merits of the Bill.

CREDIT UNION BILL 2025

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

That the –

- (a) Credit Union Bill 2025 (Bill No. 29/2025), be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must be immediately referred to the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs;
- (d) Standing Committee must report on the Bill at the September-October sitting of Parliament and upon presentation of the report on the Bill by the Standing Committee;
- (e) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament, but that two hours be given to debate the Bill, with the right of reply given to me as the Member moving the motion.

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

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill is intended to repeal the existing Credit Union Act of 1954 since its review in 2014. It was then tabled for the first time in Cabinet in April 2024, where the Cabinet endorsed the Bill, and on the same decision, Cabinet endorsed that the proposed Bill, in consultation with the Office of the Solicitor-General be tabled in Parliament.

The Bill was the outcome of the International Monetary Fund's Financial Sector Assessment Programme's recommendation in 2006. It was part of the Reserve Bank's ongoing initiative on financial inclusion, and also because of the various calls for the Reserve Bank of Fiji to take up the regulation and supervision of credit unions in Fiji at that time and honourable Kumar would be aware of that. This led to the review of the existing Act, with the objective of establishing an appropriate regulatory and supervisory framework for Fiji's Credit Union industry.

Just very briefly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the key rationale for the revision of the Credit Union Act 1954, while the Act of 1954 has served as the main pillar or cornerstone of legislation for credit unions in Fiji for over seven decades, and we all know that things have changed, complexities of the current financial architecture, landscape and also the needs of credit union members. All these, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has changed drastically, and it is safe to say that the Act does not reflect current best practices and provisions for strong governance, robust risk management frameworks, hence exposing credit unions and their members, more importantly, the members, to increase financial risk. It is also designed to address industry decline and promote growth and survival of credit union.

Statistics indicate a significant decline in active credit unions and financial co-operatives. The number of active credit unions declined from 400 in 2008 to only 17 as of February 2025. In fact, in 2018, the total asset size of credit union was \$173 million. The latest data available in September 2021

was only \$200 million, so it has been on the decline. That is why, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the rapid decline since 2008 underscores the importance of getting this comprehensive framework, essentially to strengthen governance practices, implement risk management principles and enhancing member services with the overall objective to safeguard member interests and promote financial stability through prudent supervisory oversight provided by the Reserve Bank of Fiji.

It has taken a while and I know these things have been hovering around since 2016. There were a number of consultations in the Western and Central Divisions. Comments from the industry were carefully considered and incorporated where relevant, and the third round of consultation also took place after 2016. Consultations were also held with the Ministry of Trade and Cooperatives for transitional measures and the Ministry of Justice and other ministries currently providing oversight of financial co-operatives and credit unions, respectively.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in light of these issues, and also due to the fact that there was a lot of consultation that was already done publicly as well as with the players, I think we need to rush this Bill a little bit, so it goes to the Committees. That is why I moved it under Standing Order 51 and to honourable Usamate's plea yesterday, I have increased the number of hours of debate from one to two hours and I know you will ask for another one but that is not going to happen; two hours will be good enough.

I commend the Bill to Parliament, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, although the Bill was done in 1954, but the intent was there to review and as honorable Minister has highlighted, a lot of consultation has taken place and now he has presented it to Parliament, so we appreciate that. I do understand the intent of the Bill, this is long overdue. We need to regulate the credit unions. In the past, there were a number of credit unions that had not given a fair deal to its members, and because Reserve Bank of Fiji was not the regulator, there was nowhere else they could take the matter except to the police or to the lawyers. By having this particular Bill, I see a lot of merits in it and it is more of a protection to the Members who want to be a member of a credit union. In that way, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome the Bill.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Kumar for her support, as well as the Opposition for their support. I also thank honourable Usamate for remaining happy about the two hours.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[Credit Union Bill 2025, moved under Standing Order 51, and referred to the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs]

REVIEW REPORT - RESERVE BANK OF FIJI INSURANCE 2021-2022 ANNUAL REPORT

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

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Report on the Reserve Bank of Fiji Insurance Annual Reports 2021 and 2022, which was tabled on 1st May, 2025.

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

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) oversees the regulation and supervision of Fiji's insurance industry. The Standing Committee on Economic Affairs reviewed the Reserve Bank of Fiji Insurance Annual Reports for 2021 and 2022, focussing on sector performance, regulatory effectiveness and consumer protection during the period marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and climate-related challenges.

Despite global and domestic challenges, Fiji's insurance industry showed resilience. Their total assets increased from \$2.3 billion in 2021 to \$2.5 billion in 2022, the growth in gross premiums owners' fund and new life insurance policies, and introduction of macro insurance products to support vulnerable communities.

While the Committee scrutinised the report, it identified pertinent issues of concern, such as:

- Consumer complaints reported only by RBF, excluding other bodies, like the Fiji Consumer Council of Fiji, Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission and insurance companies.
- RBF's dual role as a regulator and compliance educator may compromise impartiality.
- Under the utilisation of digital platforms for public education and transparency, the insurance appoints their assessors, raising concerns of biasness.
- Filing system is only being paid for by insured citizens, in addition to the lack of data on household coverage for fire, cyclone and medical insurance.
- Insurance agent training lacks standardisation and accreditation.
- Increase in life insurance terminations due to forfeitures and surrenders.
- Outdated Insurance Act 1998 requires urgent review.
- Include consolidated complaint data from all the relevant bodies.
- Establish clear boundaries between prudential regulation and consumer protection.
- Enhance digital platform for consumer awareness.
- Create an independent panel of assessors and medical professionals.
- There needs to be a review of the fire levy system for equitable cost sharing.
- Publish annual data on household insurance coverage.
- Develop accredited training programmes for insurance agents.
- Strengthen public education and agent accountability.
- Fast-track the review of the Insurance Act 1998.

The Committee commends RBF for its collaboration with insurance companies and the InsuResilience Solutions Fund supporting financial resilience amongst vulnerable communities. Initiatives such as *Na Noda i Lavo* television programme promote financial literacy and public engagement. I would like to take this opportunity to thank and acknowledge the RBF for its timely and constructive response to the recommendations put forward by the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs.

The RBF has demonstrated a clear commitment to reform and progress by engaging stakeholders, initiating strategic reviews and aligning its operations with national development priorities, a willingness to enhance consumer protection, improve regulatory clarity and strengthen transparency reflects a proactive approach to addressing the challenges identified in the review.

The Committee urged for continued reforms and strategic partnerships to ensure Fiji's insurance industry becomes more inclusive, transparent and resilient. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. I have a list of speakers with me. Each is given seven minutes to deliver his or her response.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the Report on the Reserve Bank of Fiji Insurance Annual Reports 2021 and 2022 and note the recommendations before us. Specifically, one of interest would be 5.4 - insurance companies under the guidance of RBF, to be encouraged to enhance the use of digital platforms. This is an ongoing challenge.

One of the recent ones that I experienced in the village is on the parametric insurance which is managed by RBF which is a really good initiative. They are now coming right down to the grassroots level to explain about these parametric insurance in relation to disasters. This specific insurance is climate-related, so if there are weather warnings or in terms of rainfall or wind speeds, this insurance kicks in. It is a good initiative. We applaud that initiative and also the fact that it will be enabled through a digital platform such as M-PAiSA.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we talk about digitalisation when we talk about digitalisation, the other concern is the progress in artificial intelligence (AI). I suppose, that can be seen as a double edged sword in terms of not only does it update or bring us to par in terms of technology, but they are, of course, across all sectors - a threat to various sectors or grades of employment. For example, one of the reports that I had accessed mentioned that AI can take over risk assessment, which is currently being done manually. These processes currently rely on manual evaluation, but AI can analyse vast amounts of data and make comparisons in risk assessment and underwriting.

On efficient claims processing, again, automated processing can speed this up. One of the interesting ones is fraud detection. We know that even AI can produce anything, including fake photographs or anything, in order to support your insurance claim. That is something which we, as a nation, really need to be geared up for in terms of the latest technologies, even though it is recommended in 5.4. It is something that we need to be aware of.

The other one I thought I would mention is recommendation 5.9, to fast-track the review of the Insurance Act 1998, which provides modernising provisions to address emerging industry trends, enhance consumer protection and align with international best practices. Insurance, especially of buildings, is dependent on the standard of building, whether you are insured or not. There are various things that the insurance will look at in terms of building standards, whether it is compliant, or cyclone-resistant.

Given that, the Ministry has been undergoing a review of the Fiji National Building Code (FNBC) to guide stakeholders involved in the building industry in regards to standards and minimum requirements for building designs, construction practices and installations, to uphold resilience, sustainability, energy efficiency, safety and the wellbeing of building occupants. That is an urgent exercise, given the severe weather patterns recently experienced, climate change and natural disasters.

Through the whole-of-government approach, the review team has been working through this and has widely consulted with all stakeholders, including local engineering and design stakeholders, resulting in the Fiji National Building Code 2024. That work will continue through the ADB consultant, which needs to be regularised under the Building Act.

However, the Building Act itself needs to be reviewed, which is an exercise being done. We are grateful to ADB in terms of the provision of a consultant, so the revised building code was developed to update the existing building code from 2004, and it caters for stronger wind loading and seismic capability, safer building strategies for flood and coastal erosion, reliable water supply and wastewater quality management, green energy efficient building strategies, fire safety requirements and disability-friendly access.

The revision of the Building Act will transfer the administration of the FNBC regulation from the Ministry of Health to the Ministry of Public Works; reconcile the overlapping legislation that exist in the Ministry of Local Government, Ministry of Trade and Ministry of Health; and identify and implement improvements that need to be made to the revised FNBC, train local experts in the private sector to facilitate future training of stakeholders and train the Ministry of Public Works staff to be the secretariat and supportive for the building code.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on this motion. The Standing Committee has proposed ten recommendations after thoroughly scrutinising the Insurance Annual Reports for 2021 and 2022 and, of course, very wide public consultation.

At the outset, I commend the Reserve Bank of Fiji for its consistent regulatory oversight of the insurance sector. They have ensured that our insurance companies remain solvent, stable and financially sound, and this is no small achievement, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time of economic strain when many sectors stumbled. Yet, the insurance sector grew, industry assets increased from \$2.3 billion to \$2.5 billion, and gross premiums rose to over \$409 million. Even life insurance uptake improved, and all that happened during the COVID-19 period.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the industry thrived, consumers did not. The stark reality is that, consumer protection remains weak and financial and insurance literacy in our country is shockingly low. Many Fijians do not fully understand what they are buying. They are not equipped to ask the right questions and often, they only discover the pitfalls when it is too late, when a claim is denied, when a payout is far lower than expected or when a policy is cancelled without clear warning or explanation.

We have all heard the heartbreaking stories. Families had to go through a lot of turmoil when their health insurance did not cover the cost of treatment. We have also come across stories where smooth or clever marketing led people to buy an insurance policy, but because of the exclusion clauses, they are denied the claims, particularly in the health sector. Now that we are signing up with BSP health insurance, I hope that honourable Members sitting here will need to be very aware of these exclusion clauses and how we can negotiate with BSP further.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2022 alone, Fiji recorded 11,579 life insurance policy terminations. I want to repeat - the number was 11,579 life insurance policy terminations. That is an alarming number in a country of our size. These terminations are typically due to four reasons. It can be death, maturity, surrender or forfeiture. What is truly concerning is that nearly half of these terminations, which is 47.3 percent, were forfeitures. That means thousands of our fellow Fijians simply stopped paying their insurance premiums because they could no longer afford to, and when that happens, they lose everything that they have paid. Years of hard-earned money are foregone.

Mr. Speaker. Sir, the data tells a painful story. In 2022, \$11.3 million was lost by struggling consumers through policy forfeitures. That is more money lost than what was paid out for policies that matured or for claims due to death. This is not just a statistic, it reflects the growing financial distress of our people. What is even more disheartening is that many of these losses were avoidable. Let me explain.

Under the current insurance law, if a policyholder has been paying premiums for, at least, three years, they become eligible to surrender their policy. When they do so, the insurance company is legally obliged to calculate and pay them the surrender value. That is money the consumer can get back, money that could help them in their time of need. But what is happening instead is that most consumers are not surrendering their policies - they are simply stopping their payments. That is what forfeiture is, unaware that they could get something back. As a result, they forfeit the entire value of the policy and insurance companies walk away with everything.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is deeply unjust. There are two troubling issues here. First, insurance companies are simply not doing enough to inform ordinary Fijians, many of whom are struggling to make these premium payments. They have a right to surrender their policies, they are not aware of it, that they can do so after three years and get some money back. This silence is not accidental, it borders on predatory behaviour, taking advantage of people's lack of financial knowledge during tough times.

Secondly, the way surrender values are calculated remains deliberately unclear. Most people have no idea how much they are owed or how it is worked out. What must we do? We must legislate; that is the first thing. Insurance companies must be legally required to notify policy holders clearly and in plain language once they qualify for a surrender payout. This should not be optional, it must be the law. The formula for surrender values must be made fully transparent - no hiding behind complex calculations and fine prints.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, insurance is supposed to offer financial security and peace of mind. But when nearly half of our policies are being forfeited, resulting in millions of dollars in losses to ordinary people, it becomes clear that the system is not working in their favour.

Let us talk about digital transformation. In a world where everyone uses a smartphone, why are insurance companies not using digital platforms to educate and engage consumers? Where is the mobile app? Where is the SMS-based education tool for our rural population and low income earners? Insurance literacy needs to be promoted. It should be accessible and understandable to all, whether you are a farmer in Ra, a market vendor in Labasa or a student in Suva. While we are talking about accessibility, let us talk about VAT on general insurance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee recommended that VAT on general insurance products be reconsidered. Currently, the application of VAT on insurance premiums not only increases the cost of insurance, but also reduces the payout.

Lastly, we have to fix this imbalance between the insurer and the insured. In this particular area, a lot of work went into this particular book. This is the first book ever produced in Fiji - Insurance Industry. This book is actually sold online by universities around the world. Unfortunately, this book was withdrawn from the Consumer Council's website, which is pretty sad.

MR. SPEAKER.- I suggest we take our break now. But before we do that, given the hour, I will entertain the Suspension Motion. So for the purposes of complying with the Standing Orders with respect to sitting times, I now call upon the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament to move a Suspension Motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

That under Standing Order 6 that so much of Standing Order 23(1) is suspended so as to allow the House to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. today to complete the remaining items listed in today's Order Paper.

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have a debate in front of us regarding the continuation of the Insurance Report, the Annual Report on Parliament and finally the Ministry of Agriculture.

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 4.04 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.40 p.m.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE REVIEW REPORT – RBF INSURANCE 2021-2022 ANNUAL REPORT

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we are continuing with our list of speakers on the motion by the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to begin my sincere thanks to the Committee Members for this Review Report. I noted the Committee's nine findings and 10 recommendations, and I would like to make these observations on a few recommendations and also make some general comments.

As per the Committee's recommendations, they can be resolved by the review of the Insurance Act once the Act is finalized. Those are the complaints issue in trying to incorporate all the complaints in future reports.

Recommendation 5.2 for a clear legislative and institutional boundary to separate prudential regulation and consumer protection.

Recommendation 5.3 is the need to fast track the review of the Insurance Act. On this, I know that RBF, together with the assistance of the industry players, commenced on the legislative and policy related work on the review of the Insurance Act 1998 and finalising the transition to a risk based solvency requirement. Subsequently, this will address industry trends, enhance consumer protection and align with international best practice, especially on moving towards risk-based solvency requirements, considering the volatile and risky status of Fiji as well as the global countries.

Recommendation 5.4 which talks about digitalization, especially the use of digital platforms to improve awareness of insurance products and tools to arrest the increase in the termination rate of insurance. This is to further grow the interest in insurance in both general and life, and to improve or maintain the same lifestyle of the people whether insured in times of risky situations or calamity. The insurance companies, RBF and we as representatives of the people, should continue to advocate for insurance for going forward.

Recommendation 5.5 for a common independent panel of qualified assessors and medical professionals. I am not sure if this is practical, for these private insurance companies have their own internally and also use external ones for more difficult cases.

Recommendation 5.6 on fire services levy, which is quite a favourable one for revenue purpose, but not sure of its practicality.

Recommendation 5.10, I think it relates to those two insurance companies who are quite helpful to RBF and as well as to government in offering macro and parametric insurance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, overall, the Fiji insurance industry sustained positive performance in 2021, 2022 and even in 2023. As an underwriting activity for both life and general insurance sectors, reported growth in gross premiums, growth on the back of a stable economic position and the absence of major catastrophic events, as well as the Fiji insurance industry continuing to be resilient because of the growing interest in insurance.

On gross premiums, it grew to an all-time high for a second consecutive year post- COVID so it is a good sign. As underwriting activity increased for both the general and life insurance sectors, the

growth of the general insurance sector was attributed to most of the classes of insurance. Similarly, life, reported growth in gross premiums underpinned by the increase in the take up of endowment products. On the claims, we can see that the total policy net claims and net claims by the insurance industries remain stable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the outlook going forward with underwriting activity increasing to an all-time high as both the life and general insurance sectors reported growth in both gross premium and net premium income. There are challenges, of high claim payments, increasing reinsurance costs and challenges with affordability of our people which can potentially hamper the Fijian industry earnings performance going forward. Included in the challenges is the emerging risk of climate related disasters, cyber threats, external geopolitical tensions and in this instance the Reserve Bank of Fiji will continue to collaborate with partner stakeholders and agencies on climate related insurance covers and products, and we would like to take this opportunity to encourage the remaining insurance to come online to assist the two who are already on their own initiative in this risky space.

There is the work on the adoption of the accounting standards, IFRS17, that will continue going forward. The Reserve Bank of Fiji engages technical assistance, provides guidance and capacity and consult with insurance companies and external auditors to ensure effective implementation. The implementation of IFRS 17, which is an accounting standard is a major challenge for the insurance industry, fundamentally changing accounting, actuarial and reporting practices and significantly impacting the supporting system and processes. Secondary impacts will affect tax products and investments. Hopefully all the players will fully comply this year (2025).

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first of all I would like to congratulate the Committee on a job well done and also commend them on the quality of the Report. The writing of the Report was done very well. I would like to recognize and congratulate the Reserve Bank of Fiji for the sterling work that it has done in the area of insurance because, of course, the insurance has a critical role protecting families, businesses and taking into account that this bit of reporting was actually during COVID-19 and the climate related disasters that happened during that time.

As has been pointed out, we have seen the report that the insurance sector has remained resilient during this period. In fact, there has been growth in assets. I noted the introduction of the parametric insurance at that particular time, first bundled parametric insurance covering different things like term life, funeral property, personal accidents, et cetera. And as had been mentioned a number of times, the increase in the gross premiums and increase in owners funds or shareholders return and the rise in the new life insurance policy. So, there has been an overall increase in that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to go briefly to some of the issues that have been raised for possible improvement, one of the things that you noticed in this Report that the complaints that were raised with the Reserve Bank, there were about 23. All 23 complaints were resolved. But in fact, there were more complaints raised to agencies like the Consumer Council of Fiji and the FCCC on insurance, but these are not reflected in this Report. So we are getting the good impact of what has been done by the complaints raised to the Reserve Bank, but not to the overall number of complaints in the insurance sector.

That is why we have in Recommendation 5.1 is a very good one. It suggests that the annual report should now incorporate a consolidated summary of all consumer complaints from all the relevant bodies, including the Consumer Council of Fiji, FCCC and insurance companies. So you get an overview of the whole sector. I think this is an important thing that we need to do in government agencies. They do not just focus on what they do, but also look at the sector in totality. Infrastructure sector, in this case, the money markets, public works, et cetera.

The second recommendation that I would like to talk to, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is in Recommendation 5.2, which states that there should be a clear legislative boundary to be established to separate the prudential regulation and consumer protection functions within the insurance sector. In the insurance sector, you have the regulatory functions and the consumer protection functions.

There is a recommendation here to separate these out, because part of that law at the moment, RBF has both of those functions. They have the regulatory function and also the issue of looking to the complaints. So, sometimes when you put these two together, it can impact on one impinging on the other. Sir, RBF as the regulator for the insurance sector, responsible for all of these things, but the conflict of interest arise when RBF is tasked with adjudicating consumer complaints against the same insurance it regulates. That is an issue - the lack of clarity in this issue of the protection of consumers.

The Report states when both parties talked about this, there were differences in their views on who had the power to address consumer complaints. The FCCC states that only the RBF is authorised under the Insurance Act to enforce its provisions, while the Reserve Bank of Fiji maintained that the FCCC can prosecute breaches under its own legislation. So these two bodies, one which has regulatory functions and protection of consumers, the other the protection of consumers, they differ in their understanding of who is supposed to take action. This is a lacuna, so that lack of clarity needs to be looked at.

Sir, FCCC, within its legislation, has the power to investigate and take action on false claims. It is given that power, so the suggestion here is that it should be specified that they can also apply to insurance companies. They also have the power in their legislation to take action on predatory selling. They can also apply that to this insurance market. This creates a regulatory gap and it can leave consumers vulnerable to unfair practises in the insurance market, so I commend that particular regulation to the House and also to the Reserve Bank of Fiji.

The third Recommendation is 5.5 which suggests that an independent panel of qualified assessors and medical professionals be established by the Reserve Bank of Fiji to carry out assessment work required by insurance companies to ensure transparency, impartiality and greater consumer confidence in the claims process. Currently what the insurers do, they appoint their own panel of medical experts to review the cases. They are appointing their own panel. In order to protect consumers, we should have an independent panel that looks at all the complaints so that there is no bias. That is what this recommendation is; it talks about the Reserve Bank of Fiji itself establishing an independent of qualified assessors and medical assessors to look at all those complaints, to make sure that the decisions that come out are completely independent and there is transparency, and impartiality of assessments. Therefore, this leads to greater consumer confidence.

The last one, I probably have time to speak to, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is in terms of Recommendation 5.6. The fire levy in Fiji is only paid for by policyholders or those who are insured. That means that others who are not paying insurance, do not contribute to this fire levy. It means there is only a small portion of the population that is paying the fire levy, that is financing the National Fire Authority, or whoever looks after it. There needs to be some way in which we can have the uninsured citizens, who do not contribute and this results in an unfair and inequitable system where the cost of maintaining fire services is borne solely by those with insurance coverage. Just a few people are bearing the weight for everyone else who has access to fire services.

The last one that I will probably speak on is Recommendation 5.8. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recommendation suggests that insurance companies, with assistance from RBF, develop an accredited training programme offered by a recognised higher education institute. A training programme specifically designed for them that will address some of these consumer issues that the recommendations in this Report have talked about, and develop this so we can get high-quality education for insurance agents to

stay updated on the industry best practices, ethical guidelines and regulatory compliance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those few words, I fully support the recommendations in the Report, and I hope that it will lead to a further enhancement of consumer protection and impartiality, and impact on the insurance sector.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are looking at the 2021 and 2022 Reports, and I thank the honourable Members who have contributed already. I think there has been quite a bit of discussion on the recommendations, and I will just touch on a few of them.

Before that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) has already submitted the 2024 Insurance Annual Report to me and a printed copy will be tabled in the next session of Parliament. Some issues to note from the 2024 Report, that the insurance industry remains resilient and stable, supported by the continued growth of the domestic economy and the absence of severe catastrophes in 2024, so that is a very positive sign.

Combined net claims and policy payments totalled about \$254.2 million, while the rest - the life insurance sector, paid out about \$139.3 million in net policy payments. There were 103,439 life insurance policies in force - 68,949 individual general insurance policies and about 5,579 group general insurance policies issued in 2024. The total assets of the life and general insurance sectors grew by about 7.5 percent, and stood at \$2.9 billion at the end of 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I agree with honourable Premila Kumar and honourable Usamate on all the issues. I think it is time that we get the insurance companies, we are also looking at the banks, but more importantly, the insurance companies as to where and how they could adopt some of these best practices so that they not only look at the bottom line, but also ensure that the interest of the customers. The insurance industry will not be there, will not be sustainable, if people who insure themselves are not able to afford and not able to efficiently and effectively claim policy payments when they need them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was hearing honourable Premila Kumar very carefully and I was wondering when she was the chief of the Consumer Council of Fiji. I think she did a very good job of raising this issue, and that book by Dr. Ganesh Chandra, which she talked about, we will have to check why the Consumer Council has taken it away. She did provide a lot of relevant issues. I thought, Mr. Speaker, Sir, she and her friends in government at that time would have reviewed the Insurance Act. But I want to tell her, she would be pleased to know that we are reviewing the Insurance Act.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- The work started.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, you can claim that you started some work, but we are actually completing it and doing it properly, Mr. Speaker. Sir. Let me also say that it is this Government that appointed a banking and insurance Ombudsman, now based with the Reserve Bank of Fiji. I agree with honourable Usamate, that a lot of the complaints that probably need to end up there are not ending up there because people are going there, and I think there is also a degree of lack of knowledge out there in the community about the role of the Banking Ombudsman and the Insurance Ombudsman. So, a lot of these complaints end up with the Fiji Competition and Consumer Commission (FCCC) and the Consumer Council of Fiji, and they do not get to the ultimate point where some of these issues can be used, assessed and then translated into possible changes to the Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have said, we will be reviewing the Insurance Act and we are hoping that, if not any time before, by the time we get into the next budget, we will have the Insurance Act reviewed to modernise provisions and address emerging industry trends, enhance consumer protection, and align with international best practices. This will benefit the insured public and the insurance industry, and the

Government will definitely get this reviewed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I said earlier, the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) has been innovative and has driven the work on increasing the awareness and adoption of insurance in Fiji. We have also asked the Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF) to look at the possibility of a national health insurance scheme to ensure we increase the coverage in the area of health insurance.

With respect to the parametric insurance, through our partnership with the InsuResilience Solutions Fund, we have targeted to enrol 5,000 people over two years from August 2024 to July 2026 and I am pleased to inform Mr. Speaker, Sir, that to date after the end of one year, we have enrolled about 4246 people, or 85 percent of the target. Therefore, for year two, we have set ourselves an ambitious target of 7000 policyholders by July 2026. We have also set aside funding for premium subsidy, and honourable Kumar, talked about it, in particular towards the most vulnerable communities earmarked to cover at least 3,500 social welfare recipients.

We are also increasing funding to enable more access for people with disabilities to get access to parametric insurance, a segment of the vulnerable population that is often ignored. So the collaboration work between the regulator, the insurance industry and relevant stakeholders will continue to ensure that the Fijian insurance industry remains sound and responsive to the needs of Fiji's insured public.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the committee for the report, and as the honourable Usamate pointed out, it is a good report. I think it points out some of the really pertinent issues affecting the industry and the insured public. I support the report.

MR. SPEAKER. - I invite the chair of the committee, the Honourable Tubuna, to speak in reply.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just like to go over some of the comments that have been raised, particularly on the review of the Building Code Act and the review of the Building Code as has been alluded to. The RBF is currently reviewing the Insurance Act, and perhaps these changes in the Act has to be harmonised with the changes that will be stipulated under the Insurance Act.

There are some issues relating to where we need to be looking at changing the legislation, perhaps the Insurance Act relating to surrender and forfeiture of insurance, where most of the consumers also are not being informed. There are quite a lot of gaps. We have made some recommendations on that and how to strengthen that information. Still, on the information of the digital platform, which is one of our recommendations, and we hope that this will be taken on board by the Reserve Bank of Fiji.

The honourable Usamate raised a very important point on the protection of consumers. I think that is very important. As we have alluded to in the report, the conflicting roles is one of the contributing factor to that, when RBF has clear institutional and prudential roles, but it is not looking after its roles in terms of the protection of the consumers. There is a conflict of roles, and that needs to be addressed.

The honourable Deputy Prime Minister has already highlighted some of the developments currently being undertaken on the parametric insurance, particularly on vulnerable communities. It needs to look into what other Government departments are doing, so that, there is coherence in this type of intervention. There are 10 policy recommendations, and the committee's role is to look at how we can influence policies, and we look forward to seeing that most of these recommendations are being implemented. We will be there to ensure that these are being implemented by the RBF and other institutions relating to insurance.

I would like to thank the honourable Members who have contributed, and the members of the committee for their contribution towards this report.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

**REVIEW REPORT – PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC
OF FIJI 2022-2023 ANNUAL REPORT**

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Review Report on the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji 2022-2023 Annual Report, which was tabled on 1st May, 2025.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to present the findings and the recommendations of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence following the review of the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji's 2022 and 2023 Annual Report.

Firstly, the Committee acknowledges the ongoing efforts to safeguard the ICT infrastructure of Parliament. Given the increasing threats of cyberattacks, we recommend that Parliament continue the regular security reviews and enhance staff training in cybersecurity best practices. We also recommend and commend the intention to expand the sign language and translation services to the committee level. This inclusive approach will enhance accessibility and participation in the democratic process, and we encourage its progression in close consultation with the relevant agency.

The Committee notes concerns regarding the timeliness of committee reports, with a significant number of annual reports yet to be deliberated on. As such, we strongly recommend amending the Standing Orders to impose specific timeframes for the review of these reports, which will ensure greater accountability and transparency. We also humbly call for monthly coordination meetings between yourself, Mr. Speaker, Committee Chairs and their secretariats, to proactively resolve logistical and operational challenges being faced by committees, including lack of quorum, sometimes inadequate meeting spaces, and limited technical capacity.

Sir, honorable Members, the issue of office space constraints remain unresolved since 2014, and we urge expedited discussions with the Ministry of Civil Service and other stakeholders, to secure adequate facilities that meet the evolving needs of our Parliament.

On staff development, we recommend the implementation of an annual training calendar for members and staff. This will ensure continuous learning, address skill gaps and align professional development with strategic parliamentary goals. With respect to international engagements, the committee supports well planned overseas study visits and meetings that align with parliamentary priorities, and we further recommend a formal post engagement reporting framework to monitor and evaluate the impacts of these engagements. We commend the Secretariat for initiating strategies to improve staff retention, and these include long service leave and insurance benefits. We encourage further steps such as flexible work arrangements and career development to retain a skilled and motivated workforce.

The Job Evaluation Exercise, last conducted in 2018, is now well overdue and we recommend that it be prioritised and completed before the next parliamentary term, to ensure staff roles remain relevant and aligned with legislative demands. The committee, further highlights the need to expedite

the adoption of a whistleblower policy, to protect staff and encourage reporting of misconduct, especially in light of the anticipated passage of the Code of Conduct Bill.

Lastly, we proudly acknowledge the progress made in promoting gender equality within the parliamentary workforce with a commendable 54 percent female representation and women in key leadership roles. This is a testament to our collective commitment to equity and inclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

These recommendations are driven by our shared objective to build a resilient, transparent and responsive parliamentary institution that delivers on its constitutional mandate and meets the expectations of the Fijian people.

I also want to take this time, as I look around this room, to say ‘thank you’ to each and every one of our Parliament staff. Thank you for your continuous support. Thank you for your dedication. Thank you for all the hard work that you do, and on that note, Sir, I commend the motion to the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion and I have a list of speakers with me. Again, each speaker is allocated 7 minutes for their the delivery. I first call on the honourable Prime Minister.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. May I start with a quote from the Annual Report that has been reported on by the committee, and highlight the words of the then Speaker and our current Head of State - His Excellency, the President, when this Report was submitted to me.

He wrote these words Mr. Speaker, Sir – “This year was marked by the sad passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, with flags flying at half-mast across the Pacific, to pay tribute to Great Britain's longest serving monarch of 70 years. We are proud and stand firm on the fact that the Westminster system still lives through the procedures of how we operate our legislature.”

And in her opening statement, our own Secretary-General, had this to say - “thanks to the dedicated efforts of our staff, we were able to continue delivering high quality services to our honourable Speaker, honourable Members of Parliament and the wider public. Throughout the year, we focused on strategic initiatives, that not only strengthened our core operations, but also expanded our outreach. This period brought both challenges and opportunities, compelling us to adapt and evolve in a rapidly changing environment”. She concluded with these words, and I quote:

“As we look to the future, we remain dedicated to transparency and accountability, making sure our stakeholders are well informed and actively involved in our journey. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who has supported us throughout this reporting period - our stakeholders, community, Governments of Australia, Japan and New Zealand through the UNDP Fiji Parliament Support Programme.

I also sincerely extend a big *vina'a vakalevu* to the hardworking and wonderful staff of Parliament for continuing to heed the call of duty. Together, we are laying the groundwork for continued success and positive impact in the years to come.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a very short contribution to the debate on this Report. Parliament is the foundation of our democracy. It is vested with legislative authority under Section 46(1) of the Constitution to make laws, oversee the work of government, and represent the needs and hopes of all Fijians. As Prime Minister my priority this year has been or this term is ending poverty and uplifting all Fijians by ensuring Parliament remains strong, inclusive and fair and accountable so that government decisions truly benefit all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee Report shows Parliament's strong work in the 2022-2023 period with 22 Bills passed, 25 sitting days, 387 committee meetings and wide public consultations. Digital tools like live broadcast and translation services improved access to information. As the honourable Chairman had mentioned, women play a vital role, making up 54 percent of the staff and holding senior leadership positions reflecting Parliament's commitment to gender equality and inclusive leadership.

Parliament's outreach such as the Parliament Bus, the school visit have helped raise awareness among young people and our communities. Through these initiatives, we are not only strengthening democracy, we are also helping to build a more informed and empowered Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Report outlines key challenges such as the delays in reviewing ministry reports, limited office and meeting space and the honourable Deputy Prime Minister is just whispering something in my ear about finding a better space for our staff. In reviewing ministry reports, limited space and meeting space, insufficient training for Members and staff, and high staff turnover, all of which can impact Parliament's efficiency and service delivery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee's recommendations are fully supported, with the aim to strengthen Parliament through better cybersecurity, accountability and inclusive communication, timely report reviews, regular training and whistleblower policy as brought up by the honourable Chair. These ensure Parliament remains transparent and well-equipped for its role. A strong and effective Parliament helps to improve the lives of all Fijians by passing laws quickly, ensuring government accountability and delivering better services, especially to the poor, through improved policies for education, health, jobs, roads and family support, to name some.

As Prime Minister, I assure the House, that we will work with the parliamentary secretariat and all relevant ministries to address the issues raised. Together, we will continue to build a Parliament that is modern, efficient and inclusive.

I thank the Secretary-General to Parliament and Secretariat staff for their commitment and dedication and I thank the Standing Committee for their oversight and constructive recommendations. Let us continue to serve with humility, unity and purpose. Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those remarks, I commend the Report to this honourable House.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, quite brief because I think a lot has been covered by the Chair and also by the honourable Prime Minister with respect to the needs of Parliament. The recommendations that have come from the Committee, let me just first say, I commend the Committee on the deliberations they have actually made and the recommendations that have come forward because they are spot on and they look at exactly what is needed in terms of going forward. A couple of things I just wanted to beef up and just mention, I think with respect to the ICT issue. I know it is an ongoing issue. Looking at and trying to make it better in terms of security, I think we must make sure that the Parliament's ICT system is well-equipped. From a budgetary perspective, I am not sure, Mr. Speaker, but I hope that we are getting enough to ensure that.

One of the things that stands out, Mr. Speaker, there is a recommendation that there be a frequent speaker and chairs meetings together with the Secretariat to be conducted monthly. It would be very beneficial, as someone who sits on the Committee and a very busy one, constantly issues that arise and one of the main issues that arises is how to accommodate all the Committees on time to actually do it, and also the increase in the days that we are allowed to sit. The current Speaker has been very good about it. We have managed to actually get the extra days to do the actual work because it needs a considerable amount of work.

One of the other things I want to mention, Mr. Speaker, is the twinning arrangements that we have with some of the Parliaments overseas are very, very effective and having just been a part of one last week or so, was very helpful to us in terms of our research and us being able to get some good thoughts together with respect to a couple of Bills that are in the House. These things actually have done us a lot of good work.

Mr. Speaker, in terms of the strengthening of staff retention, it is not just the problem at Parliament, I think it is far reaching than that but we must look at it and see how we can actually stop that because we are losing good people who are leaving for overseas, et cetera, and we must look at how we can actually keep them in terms of additional benefits that may be given to our staff. All of those things that would actually keep them. Flexible work arrangements also would be an easier way to see if it can be done.

Mr. Speaker, in terms of the whistleblower policy, in light of the fact that it was raised by the Committee, we are looking at the Code of Conduct Bill and this is something that needs to be seriously looked at in terms of how we can make the arrangements, the consultations that are required to ensure that the policies effectively address these issues and concerns and align ourselves with best practices.

Commendable also, Mr. Speaker, the Secretary-General has done a phenomenal job in making sure that you run an efficient machine. In terms of also the gender equality issues that have come out in the Report, it is important that we see that especially so that we align ourselves with the Sustainable Development Goals.

Mr. Speaker, those are just some issues that I know. There are other speakers. I know the honourable Leader of the Opposition is to speak, so I will leave some of the other things to him. But in short, a very commendable Report and I also agree with the contents of the Report and the recommendations. I hope that this will be taken on board in terms of the extra resources that Parliament needs. The Ministry of Finance to look at Parliament in terms of a favourable way to get us more resources.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- The honourable Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Ministers, Cabinet Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Assistant Ministers and Members of Parliament. I rise to make my contribution in support of a Review Report of the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji 2022-2023 Annual Report as tabled by the Chair of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, once again, a Committee I am privileged to serve on.

On the outset, Mr. Speaker, I wish to acknowledge the strong leadership that guided this Parliament during the reporting period. I especially recognise the former Speaker of Parliament, *Turaga na Tui Cakau*, His Excellency Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu who has since been appointed as the President of the Republic of Fiji. Mr. Speaker, His Excellency served as Speaker during one of the most turbulent periods in our vibrant democracy; navigating a time of unprecedented political transition, uncertainty and heightened public interest in our parliamentary process. His leadership brought calm, dignity and order to this House and helped restore trust in Parliament as an institution of the people.

Today, under your stewardship, Mr. Speaker, we continue that journey, building a Parliament that is transparent, inclusive and responsive to the voice of our citizens. This Report, Mr. Speaker, is not merely a summary of administrative performance. It is a blueprint for institutional reform and resilience. I wish to highlight three key priority areas that call for urgent attention.

Office space constraint, which is a long-standing and unresolved issue. Mr. Speaker, one of the most pressing operational challenges remains the lack of adequate space to conduct parliamentary business. Since 2014, this issue has been persistent. Committees must compete for a limited number of

meeting rooms, affecting schedules, quorum and productivity. I therefore respectfully ask both the Legislative and Executive to explore the possibility of returning to the Veiuto Parliament Complex at Nasova, which was purpose-built to support the full scope of parliamentary work. If a return is not feasible, Mr. Speaker, I urge that we commit to a long-term infrastructure solution that supports our growing legislative demand and reflects the dignity of this institution.

The Report highlights that, out of 69 annual reports tabled, only nine have been reviewed, with 55 still pending before various Standing Committees. This delay undermines the Parliament's critical role in oversight. I strongly support the recommendation to amend the Standing Order to introduce mandatory timelines for Committee review of referred reports. Our accountability to the people depends on timely scrutiny of public institutions.

Mr. Speaker, on regional and global engagement, Parliament's strategic partnership through UNDP, Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) and Pacific Peer Exchanges have brought valuable reforms, including improved Committee procedures and staff capacity building. I support formalising post-engagement reporting to ensure that lessons learned through international exposures translate into practical reform at home.

I commend the Civic Education and Media Unit, which, despite staff shortages, managed to reach over 1.3 million Fijians via social media, re-engage schools and increase public participation in our democratic process. These outreach efforts build trust and reconnect the people to Parliament, especially the youth and our rural communities.

On staff retention and wellness of our staff and Members of Parliament, Mr. Speaker, Parliament's greatest asset is its people - our members and our dedicated staff. I commend the efforts already underway to support staff retention, including proper salary adjustment through a comprehensive job evaluation exercise, the long service leave benefit, professional development and internal wellness programme.

I also acknowledge with appreciation the recent introduction site visit by the medical team, which provide essential health services to Members and staff right here at the Parliament precinct. Moreover, the provision of the recent health life insurance for Members of Parliament is a progressive step, but it must go further, Mr. Speaker, considering the age, health profiles of many Members and the stress and responsibilities we carry. I strongly recommend that this insurance be enhanced to include regular screening and expanded coverage. A healthy Parliament serves a healthy nation.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I firmly believe that strong institutions are the backbone of national development. Parliament is not just a place of debate. It is where national priorities are scrutinised, tested and shaped into laws of our Fiji. This Report and its recommendations reflect a collective effort to build a more responsive and effective legislature. I commend the Parliament Secretariat, the entire Parliamentary staff, the Committees staff and my fellow Members of Parliament, the bipartisan report that is presented before the House is forward-looking and grounded in the realities of our institution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, can I request Parliament to erect a tent and provide some chairs somewhere in the front lawn during Parliament sitting weeks for the drivers that await for their principals outside Parliament. I fully support the adoption of this Report and encourage swift implementation of its recommendations.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to acknowledge the Committee, the Chair and the Members for the work put behind preparing this Report. Of course, I also join the honourable Prime Minister and those who have spoken before me in acknowledging the hard-working Parliamentary staff, both past and present, and of course, including your good self, honourable Speaker, Sir.

I intend not to repeat what has been covered by our previous speakers, but I know that they are quite relevant. I know that in the Report it talks about Job Evaluation Exercise (JEE) and, of course, the staff turnover and other issues. Perhaps the only comment that I would like to make, Sir, is this institution is highly regarded in our nation and in other jurisdictions as well. For us to attract the best people, I argue that we need the best in Parliament when it comes to the support staff because the quality of work that will come out of this Parliament is also dependent on the support and advice that is given by the support staff. For us to attract the best of the talents and the skills, the professionals that we have here and maybe recruitment from abroad as well, we just need to create that environment for them in terms of their working conditions, including remuneration, Mr. Speaker, Sir. That is something that is important for us in terms of the way forward.

I just wish to concentrate my contribution within the limited time that I have in the findings of the Report in paragraph 3.3.7 which talks about the effectiveness of inter-parliamentary visits by Members of Parliament and staff. Perhaps I will relate particularly the work, it is not only the Committee Members, but part of the delegation of the honourable Speaker into meetings like the Pacific Islands Parliamentary Group and the Inter-Parliamentary Union Assembly. I intend to just focus on a few things, particularly in terms of the way forward.

We appreciate the Report and we have come a long way, but we cannot deny the fact that things keep changing. And of course, this comes with its own challenges as well. The big challenge for us, therefore, is how do we remain relevant and how do we remain proactive because we can all agree that changes in the external environment will dictate the change within. Otherwise, we will be irrelevant or we will always be reactive. This is, perhaps, a good opportunity for us to prepare this Parliament for the future, given the current challenges we are going through.

This week, we have talked a lot about our international commitments and obligations, and again, we covered it this morning, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This is where I want to focus my address today, particularly on the four core roles of Parliament; in lawmaking, in budget approval and budget allocations, in oversight and in representation.

Parliaments play a critical role, particularly, I would like to focus on our global commitments and how do we localise these global issues here in Parliament? In the IPU Impact Report of 2022, they have identified climate change as the key priority for the IPU-member parliaments. How do we localise that here in terms of our laws, budget allocation, oversight, representation and the core functions of Parliament? We have come a long way from the past, and then from 2014 to today. What will we do now to prepare this Parliament for the future? We have the Sendai Framework, Addis Ababa Action Agenda, Paris Agreement and the SDGs – all these need to be domesticated and localised. Our laws are effective enough to address these issues and with that, comes the resource allocation and budgeting. Let us not only speak about the issues, but this Parliament has a responsibility to allocate the resources accordingly. Of course, we have our international partners, but the initial responsibility lies within the country, and I hope that we will take that seriously.

Oversight is very important. Monitoring and evaluation - probably something that we can consider is having special committees to look at our international commitments. I know that previously, we discussed our Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Can those NDCs be brought into Parliament and debated, rather than just a few having access to that information and taking it to the UN and saying, “This is our commitment”. However, the question will come back to this Parliament; “What are you doing about allocating resources, the laws, oversight and representation?” We have to ensure that our laws and policies are pro-poor, gender sensitive and inclusive. We need to ensure that, and that is why the role of Parliament is so important.

Thank you for the extra few minutes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and that is my short contribution. I fully support the motion before the House.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me start with two points that honourable Koya and the honourable Leader of the Opposition raised and, that is, resourcing of Parliament, before I talk about the practice of Parliament and the other comments that they have made.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under section 37(a) of the Financial Management Act 2004, all independent offices, including the Parliament of Fiji, should be or are adequately resourced, to ensure that they operate independently and effectively exercise its powers and performs its functions and duties.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since we came into Government, you will notice that in the 2023-2024 Budget, we are talking about 2022-2023 Financial Year, we increased the budget for Parliament, in fact, we doubled the budget from \$8 million to \$16 million, we continued to increase it from 2024-2025, and in 2025-2026, we increased it to \$17.3 million. Sir, this is in recognition of what the honourable Prime Minister said and what I said in the last Parliament and I was speaking to the Leadership Fiji today at lunchtime where I said, the practice of politics is as important as the formulation of economic and social policy.

Part of the practice of politics emanates from how and what we do in Parliament and what sort of resources we provide to the honourable Members of Parliament, the secretariat and your office, Sir. We have recognised that, and that is why Parliament's budget allocation is reflecting on what we, as a Government, believe in them. I know the Opposition understands this.

This budget, reflected in the salaries and allowances, and the respect that we have provided as part of the resourcing agenda to the Office of the honourable Leader of the Opposition, which was always the practice in the previous Parliaments under all the prime ministers, including our recent Prime Minister during his term as Prime Minister before, where the Office of the Leader of the Opposition was adequately resourced, his salaries were equivalent to a Cabinet Minister, and Members of Parliament were given enough resources. We know we did that when we came into Government, despite all the flak that the Government received, where we increased the salaries of the Backbenchers from \$40,000 to \$95,000. So this is part of the allocation of the resources, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The point we are making is that we are providing adequate resources, and I take the point that honourable Koya and the honourable Leader of the Opposition raised about space, the honourable Deputy Speaker also raised that. Mr. Speaker, Sir, part of the allocation of the increased budget was to ensure that we equip this Parliament with the appropriate technology, appropriate e-platforms, and making sure that Parliament staff and the Office of the Speaker is able to deliver these initiatives in a way that reflects proper parliamentary democracy, freedom, and the ability of honourable Members to do their work.

In the 2025-2026 financial year, \$17.2 million has been allocated, of which 87 percent of the budget caters for operational expenditures, while 6 percent is for capital expenditure. We recognise that Parliament has a lot of operational expenditure. The slight decrease in the 2025-2026 Budget is due to the appointment of three Ministers and three Assistant Ministers, reducing the Personal Emoluments allocation for the Members of Parliament, and the Ministers and Assistant Ministers' salaries are reflected under their respective Ministries. Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, medical and life insurance benefits for Members of Parliament are included in Parliament's budget, along with funding allocated for the purchase of an accounting system. This system will help ensure that Parliament exercises its powers and performs its duties independently.

As part of the ongoing digital upgrade of parliamentary processes, Parliament intends to automate Hansard business operations, establish an independent ICT structure, and implement a Human Resource Management Information System. That is part of the budgetary allocations for this financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have said earlier, as the honourable Prime Minister has been saying, right from the day we came into Government and we understand the issues raised about space, in all Parliaments before this Parliament since 2014, the spacing, the political parties office and staffing were all catered for as part of the Parliamentary grants which include political parties. Unfortunately, those who are not in any party are not eligible for receiving their party funds but, again, that is to ensure that political parties who are represented in Parliament are adequately resourced, so that allocation is also there. In terms of resource, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are very open and amenable to addressing some of those concerns.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to take this opportunity to thank you for your leadership. I thank the Secretary-General, all the Parliament Staff for their professional work and the ability to organise things for all Members of Parliament, including the servicing of the Committees.

With that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the Report.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank all the honourable Members, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and National Planning, National Development and Statistics, honourable Koya and honourable Ravunawa, for your contributions this afternoon. Thank you very much. I know that we still have one more motion to debate this evening, so I will just end with my thanks to everyone who have contributed.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for their Report. If I may briefly be permitted to speak outside the box as it were. On behalf of my predecessor, His Excellency the President, the Secretary-General and her staff, we thank all of you - the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members who have taken the floor, as well as the honourable Members of this House, for your kind words and support.

We will now proceed to the vote. The Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT – MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE 2019-2022 ANNUAL REPORTS

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates on the Consolidated Review Report on the Ministry of Agriculture 2019-2020, 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 Annual Report, which was tabled on 1st May, 2025.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to present the findings and recommendations of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Natural Resources on the Ministry of Agriculture's Annual Reports for the period 2019-2020, 2020-2021 and 2021-2022.

The Committee conducted a thorough review of the Ministry's performance over these three reporting periods. We focussed on policy implementation, programme delivery, resource management and the Ministry's response to the increasingly complex challenges facing the sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the key observations from the Committee are as follows:

(1) Improve Agriculture Productivity

The Ministry has made notable progress, enhancing crop yield and livestock production through the introduction of improved seed variety, adoption of modern farming techniques and a comprehensive farmers' training programme. This initiative has positively contributed to food security and income generation in rural communities.

(2) Support Smallholders and Subsistence Farmers

Efforts to empower smallholder farmers have been a focal point of the Ministry's programme. Increasing access to extension services, agricultural inputs and market opportunities have helped many farmers to improve their productivity. However, the Committee notes the need for further outreach and ensures inclusivity across all vulnerable groups.

(3) Climate Change Adaptation and Resilience

The Ministry's integrated climate-smart agricultural practice into its operations recognises the urgent need to mitigate the impact of climate vulnerability. Despite this effort, the Committee states that ongoing investment is necessary to strengthen disaster preparedness, infrastructure, resilience and adoption of adaptive technologies.

(4) Research Innovation and Technology Transfer

The Committee commends the Ministry's collaboration with research institutions and international partners to drive innovation. Continued support for agriculture research and effective dimensions to a new technology remains vital for the sector's growth.

(5) Financial Governance Performance

The Ministry has demonstrated prudent financial management and transparent reporting during the review periods. Opportunities exist to further enhance operational efficiency, and ensure optimal utilisation of resources for maximum impact.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, recommendations for the Committee are as follows:

- (1) Expand target support and access to financing for smallholder farmers, particularly women and youth, to foster inclusive growth.
- (2) Increase investment in climate resilience, agriculture infrastructure, and promote widespread adoption of climate-smart farming practices.
- (3) Strengthen extension services by increasing the number of field officers and improve capacity building programme.
- (4) Enhance collaboration with research institutes and the private sector to promote innovation, commercialisation and agribusiness development.
- (5) Implement a robust monitoring and evaluation mechanism to track programme outcomes and inform future policy directions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the Report to this august House and look forward to a constructive debate on the way forward for the Fiji agriculture sector.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. I have a list of speakers and each speaker will have seven minutes to deliver their statement.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the Consolidated Review Report on the Ministry of Agriculture's Annual Reports for the financial year 2019-2020, 2020-

2021 and 2021-2022, tabled as Parliamentary Paper No. 47/2025.

At the outset, I wish to extend my heartfelt congratulations to the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources, honourable Tunabuna, for his stewardship of this review process and, more importantly, on his recent appointment as the Minister for Agriculture. I know he brings with him a deep sectoral knowledge and practical insights, and I am confident that the Ministry is now in steady and capable hands.

I also extend my thanks to the Committee members for the thoroughness of their work, the diligence showed in travelling to the outer regions, and their consultations with farmers which reflect the kind of legislative oversight that upholds transparency and strengthens good governance.

Mr. Speaker, agriculture is not just another portfolio, it is the backbone of rural Fiji. It feeds our people, grounds our identity and offers dignity through labour and land. It is the single most important sector for inclusive economic development and yet, for decades, it has struggled under the weight of inconsistent policies, outdated laws and chronic under-investment.

The Committee's Report covering three financial years gives this Parliament a detailed picture of both, the achievements and the constraints faced by the Ministry during that time. Those years were marked by historic disruptions - the COVID-19 pandemic, global price shocks and repeated cyclones. Yet, amidst that turbulence, the Ministry continued to deliver, keeping food flowing, responding to disasters and laying the groundwork for long-term reform.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee rightly highlights the strength of the Ministry. Among them, two consecutive years of unqualified audit opinions from the Auditor-General, a testament to financial discipline, the successful establishment of climate smart agricultural initiatives and the rollout of the Women in Agriculture Programme, which has reached over 1,000 women farmers. However, the Committee also raises legitimate concerns and the gaps in monitoring and evaluation, inconsistent programme delivery across divisions and limited access to information to rural farmers. These are not abstract criticisms, they are specific, solvable problems and the Coalition Government has taken them very seriously.

The Coalition Government has made record investments in agriculture. Since taking Office in 2022, the Coalition Government has more than doubled the Ministry's budget from \$54.8 million in the 2022-2023 financial year to \$115.3 million in the 2025-2026 financial year. That level of commitment sends a clear message, the days of treating agriculture as peripheral are over. This increased investment has enabled the Ministry to implement a wide range of reforms in direct response to the Committee's findings. The establishment of a monitoring and evaluation unit has been prioritised. With new staff, digital systems and quarterly reviews, the Ministry now has a framework to track not just spending but results.

The Farm Mechanisation Programme has been restructured in line with the Committee's recommendation. The Ministry has issued clear rules on usage and maintenance of equipment and has begun training programmes to ensure sustainability and shared ownership. The Coalition Government is also investing in rural connectivity and agriculture, including a digital platform for farmers to access real-time information on markets, weather and government services. This directly addresses the information gaps highlighted during the Committee's field visits to the Northern and Western Divisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the report's most urgent call is for legislative reform and the Coalition Government has heard that call. With technical support from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization and the Solicitor General's Office, the Ministry is currently reviewing eight major pieces of legislations including the Dogs Act 1968 and the Land Conservation and Improvement Act

1953. Some of these laws are older than this very Parliament and they no longer reflect the realities of today's agriculture sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government is also tackling the issue of over-reliance on imported inputs. Through targeted investment in local fertiliser production, pulse crop promotion and the revival of underutilised cane lease lands, the Ministry is pursuing a vision of agricultural sovereignty, where Fijian farms grow not only for domestic security but for regional competitiveness.

Gender inclusivity remains a priority with the launch of the Gender in Agriculture Policy 2022-2027. The Coalition Government has committed to ensuring that women are not just recipients of agricultural services, they are planners, innovators and leaders in the field. Similarly, the Youth in Agriculture Programme aims to revitalise interest in agriculture among our younger citizens and provide viable career pathways in this sector.

The Committee has also challenged the Ministry to better align its work with the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular SDG 2 and SDG 13. That work has begun and the Ministry is now building a results-based framework in partnership with the Ministry of Finance and international development partners so that future reporting will be more targeted, measurable and transparent. In the end, the Report is not a verdict, it is a roadmap. It shows us where progress has been made and where more courage and clarity are required. The Coalition Government is not afraid of that, the Coalition Government embraces it because agriculture is not just a sector. It is a system that determines whether food is affordable, whether young people stay in rural areas, whether women can farm safely, and whether Fiji can chart a sovereign path in a volatile world.

The Coalition Government commends this Report and affirms its full commitment to implementing its recommendations in partnership with farmers, communities and the new leadership of the Ministry of Agriculture. God bless our farmers and God bless Fiji.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate before the House. As a Member of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources, I have had the privilege of participating in the extensive review of the documents, including our nine-day site visit to the Northern and Western Divisions. This process has provided us with invaluable first and insights into the state of agriculture sector, which is truly the bedrock of our nation's food security and livelihoods.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the commendable efforts and achievements of the Ministry of Agriculture during this challenging period, which included the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic. The agriculture sector has shown positive growth, with its real Gross Domestic Product value increasing from \$764.4 million in 2020-2021 to \$796.4 million in 2021-2022. This growth is a testament to the resilience of our farmers and the Ministry support.

We commend the Ministry for its proactive policy development, notably the launch of the Gender in Agriculture Policy (2022–2027) and Women in Agriculture Programme which has supported over 1,000 women farmers since 2016. The swift disaster response with new Standing Operating Procedures enabling initial damage assessment reports within 24 hours of *Tropical Cyclone Yasa* is also highly commendable, securing vital rehabilitation funding.

Furthermore, the Ministry successfully surpassed its export target, achieving a 16 percent increase in fresh and frozen agricultural produce in 2021-2022, and maintained an unqualified audit opinion in the last two financial reports. These are significant achievements that underscore the Ministry's dedication. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we acknowledge these successes, it is our duty as a Committee to also highlight areas that require urgent attention and strategic intervention. Our review has identified several

persistent challenges, if not addressed, could hinder the long-term sustainability and growth of our agriculture sector.

Our major concern is the outdated nature of our agricultural legislation. The Ministry itself is noted that many of its 26 pieces of legislation are archaic and do not align with the current practices and challenges. While eight are under review with UNFAO assistance, there must be a concrete timeline for reviewing all these critical laws, and necessary funding and legal support must be provided to truly modernise this framework, which is vital for the agricultural sector's transformation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our site visits revealed regional disparities in programme delivery. We observed inconsistency across divisions due to uneven distribution of human resources, insufficient logistical support, and inadequate funding. We must ensure a fair distribution of staff and resources, and build regional capacities so that every farmer, regardless of their location, receives equitable support.

The lack of robust monitoring and evaluation system is another critical hindrance. Without effective data management, the Ministry cannot truly assess the impact and effectiveness of its programmes. Specific steps must be taken to implement digitization and provide continuous training for officers in data collection analysis, as recommended by the Committee.

Concerns also remain regarding the sustainability of Government-funded projects, particularly the upkeep of shared farming equipment. Clear guidelines need to be put in place and specialised training to be provided to communities to ensure these valuable assets are properly maintained for long term benefit. Furthermore, farmers, especially in the Western and Northern Divisions, reported limited access to information and technical support. In this digital age, we must ensure that modern telecommunication means are used to reach our rural communities with vital information - weather updates and policy changes. The Ministry must establish an effective two-way feedback framework system to truly listen to our farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our agriculture sector remains highly vulnerable to rising costs of imported inputs, high transport costs and impacts of climate change. Innovative strategies must be implemented to reduce our reliance on imported fertilisers and pesticides by supporting local production. We must ensure lasting commitment between farmers and industries, like tourism to secure local markets.

Finally, the Committee noted the decline in sugar cane production and concerns about underutilised land under sugarcane leases. Concrete discussions by the Ministry of Agriculture should be initiated by the Ministry of Sugar to coordinate policies, maximise returns on farmland and encourage sustainable practices, like crop rotation with pulses to improve soil health and reduce reliance on imported fertilisers.

In conclusion, the Ministry of Agriculture has a truly vital role in our nation's progress. It is our collective responsibility here in this Parliament to ensure that the Ministry is equipped with the resources, modernised 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 agriculture sector is consistent, sustainable, economically vibrant and resilient for generations to come.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I respond to the motion before the House, I wish to express that I am deeply honoured and humbled by the trust and confidence by the honourable Prime Minister placed in me through my appointment as the Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Waterways. With deep humility and great pride, I step into this role with an honour that goes beyond title or duty. It is a true calling to serve our land, people and the future that we share together.

I also look forward to working closely with the Minister for Agriculture and Waterways, *turaga dreu*, honourable Tomasi Tunabuna. As we strive to build a more resilient, sustainable and forward thinking agriculture sector – one that nourishes our families, powers our economy and safeguards the wellbeing of our future generation. Sir, I am here to serve you with integrity, transparency and unwavering commitment. I believe we all understand that agriculture lies at the heart of our nation, our farmers, who are the lifeblood of our communities, and the resilience is the foundation of our strength.

To the motion, Sir, I thank the honourable Deputy Chairperson and the Members of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources in tabling a very comprehensive and factual consolidated report, especially in amalgamating the three annual reports that we may consider as outdated. However, I want to remind the House that the findings highlighted by the Committee are a true testimony of the problems that are still hindering agriculture development to-date. Sir, I two problems or weaknesses that was highlighted by the Committee.

One, is the regional disparities in programme delivery. The Committee has noted the inconsistency in the implementation of some agriculture programmes in some divisions, basically, due to quality and uneven distribution of human resources, inadequate logistics and inefficient resources.

The second one is the lack of monitoring and evaluation. This has been an ongoing problem for most of the Government programmes – the lack of robust or close monitoring and proper data management to assess the effectiveness and success of programmes and initiatives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not have to mention all the 11 weaknesses and findings that the Committee has highlighted in the consolidated report, since all honourable Members are aware of. However, the good thing is that the Committee has also made 11 recommendations to address those 11 problems. The onus is now with the Minister and the Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Waterways and the Ministry staff to re-strategize and move forward. I can assure this august House, that we will do our best to ensure that all the 11 recommendations are being addressed for the benefit of our people and our nation.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to take this opportunity to extend my appreciation to the staff of the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways, for their tireless efforts and commendable work to-date. Your professionalism, innovation and commitment to serve have been instrumental in driving progress across the sector. Together, we will continue to contribute meaningfully, to Fiji's National Development Plan in the Global Sustainable Goals, ensuring that agriculture remains a cornerstone of prosperity and sustainability, for generations to come. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion before the House.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will try to be very brief as well. Again, I acknowledge the work of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources under the leadership of the then Chair, the current Minister. I also congratulate the Deputy Chairperson, honorable Ravu, for presenting the Committee Report to Parliament this afternoon. May I also congratulate the newly appointed Assistant Minister. At RKS, the honourable Minister was very well known by a name and if you may allow me, Sir, to congratulate “Simato” as the newly appointed Minister.

I will just focus on a few recommendations. First is, as alluded to by the honourable Assistant Minister, on the importance of data because of the key role that the Ministry of Agriculture plays. There was a lot of effort made in the past to bring the data up to speed. The South Pacific Community assisted, retired statisticians from New Zealand, even from the National Bureau of National Statistics.

I think it is important, not only for the Ministry of Agriculture but for all the Ministries that when it comes to data, we need to have the right people to manage it, and statisticians are the best people to keep the data because they understand the terminology and are familiar with it. That was one of the key

issues in the agriculture sector previously, and I hope that, that will be maintained. A lot of efforts have been made to train officials, and I hope that that work will continue because data is so important, Mr. Speaker, Sir, not only in terms of situational awareness, but very importantly, in the policy formulation and strategising to prepare the sector for the current challenges and the opportunities that do come with it. Both are covered under Recommendation 2 and Recommendation 5, but I will not go into the details.

Recommendation 4 is about how technology can assist the Ministry. We are thankful that Government is now rolling out to the 5 percent that were not covered previously, particularly when it comes to other rural areas because technology can be very important in terms of extension work. For example, there may not be a livestock officer in Kabara, but with technology, the livestock farmer can just use the technology that is available to send real images to Koronivia in Suva, where there are specialists who can identify the problem and come up with solutions as well. It is very effective too for marketing. A lot of times, we are not aware of what is in existence in the islands, but if we have this reliable communication in the outer islands, we should be able to access them as well and arrange for markets for those who are in our rural communities.

I will go straight to Recommendation 7 about the issue of over-reliance on imports. I know that efforts have been made by the Government to look at import substitution, demand-driven commodities and value chain, particularly in terms of cold storage, et cetera, which are all important, as well as technology. When it comes to off-season, things like having nurseries or greenhouses, hydroponics, et cetera, so that production can continue, and that is why it is so important for us when it comes to new technologies and mechanisation, and the programmes need to be supported by the Government which is already being undertaken.

Recommendation 8 is the review of the legislation. This has been a big issue in the past. The honourable Minister understands this. There were discussions that there will be an umbrella Act, so to speak, but we do not have the specialists in the drafting section, et cetera. I know that this was one of the main item agenda when we had the Parliamentary Retreat in Natadola a few months back when we started Parliament in 2023, because we become victims of the archaic legislations that we have, particularly when it comes to quarantine laws.

Brazil is one of the biggest food-producing countries in the world, but we cannot access the meat and whatever from Brazil simply because our laws are just structured around New Zealand and Australian systems. We cannot import fruits and whatever from China because of our archaic laws, but other countries benefit from it. Australia gets the fruits from China and then re-exports to Fiji. We need to have this sorted, and I know that this was one of the frustrations of our good friend, Mr. George Patel, when he was alive - frustrations that he has when it comes to importing, processing and then re-exporting.

The last one is on the recommendation of working together with the sugar industry. I know that we are going to have a Special Committee on Sugar, but sugar is part of agriculture. We cannot isolate sugar from non-sugar agriculture. It is time now that we bring the two together.

Unfortunately, I am caught up with time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will just stop there, and the rest will work with the honourable Minister. Once again, congratulations!

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for his contribution. Our last batsman today is none other than the honourable Leader of the Opposition had referred to by another name, probably picked up at RKS.

HON. T. TUNABUNA.- The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Members of this House and viewers viewing this session; *ni sa bula vinaka*. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the Review Report on the Ministry of Agriculture Annual Report 2019-2020, 2020-2021 and 2021-

2022. I also thank the honourable Leader of Opposition for introducing that name to Parliament this afternoon.

Before I commence with my contribution, I wish to take this opportunity to thank the Leader of the Coalition Government, the honourable Prime Minister. Sir, thank you very much for your trust, faith and your confidence in me, and for giving me the opportunity to serve as the Minister for Agriculture and Waterways. It is an honour and privilege to be the Minister for the Ministry that I once served for about 35 years. I am confident, and I will serve to the best of my ability and to take this sector to another level. I also wish to thank all Members of this august House, members of the public, friends, supporters and family members for your prayers, best wishes and support.

I wish to extend my condolences, on behalf of the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways, to the family of Miss Patrino Telongo for her untimely passing. Miss Patrino was a proud daughter of Rabi, and she was only 34 years. She left behind her husband and her siblings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir I wish to thank the Standing Committee on Natural Resources for the detailed review of the 2019-2022 Ministry of Agriculture's Report. I also acknowledge the efforts of the Ministry of Agriculture with their unwavering commitment and tireless effort in advancing the agriculture sector. The Ministry's comprehensive approach, contributing and combining strategic policies, technical assistance and grassroots collaboration has empowered farmers, boosted innovation and fortified climate change and climate resilience.

Mr. Speaker, in 2023, the ministerial realignment was approved for restructuring key Divisions, reinstating the Lands Resource Planning and Development Division and re-establishing the Waterways Division back into the Ministry's organisational structure.

Also in 2023-2024 financial year, the Ministry launched the VitiAgri Data Hub, a centralised digital platform that manages vital agriculture data, including farmer demographics, production records, Government assistance, farm visits, input usage, market insights, clusters registration, et cetera.

Sir, in promoting long-term sustainability of projects, the Division is collaborating closely with the Project and Budget and Monitoring and Evaluation Unit of the Economic Planning and Statistics Division. Technical divisions are being trained to also integrate monitoring and evaluation components into the implementing programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry's IT Unit is being expanded. The Ministry will equip 38 rural and maritime stations with Starlink Satellite Internet Systems in this financial year. The Ministry helpline will be promoted as a key support tool, with direct and social media engagement managed by the Information and Communications Unit of the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the e-agriculture strategy under the 2025 to 2029 National Development Plan aims to boost economic growth through agriculture development supported by efficient ICT solutions. The Ministry aims to enhance data collection and risk analysis within the agriculture sector, and as part of the effort, it will expand the existing National Farmers Database to include broader agricultural data transformation into a centralised hub.

The Ministry's 10-year policy aims to reduce Fiji's high import bills and to strengthen agriculture initiatives through thematic strategies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Cabinet has endorsed a review of 27 outdated agriculture legislation, assisted by technical and financial support from the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, and the project is

planned for five years. In 2025 and 2026, a budget of \$147,000 has been allocated for reviewing major legislation, and the Ministry will focus on prioritising the review of the following in the first year:

- (1) Land Conservation and Improvement Act 1953;
- (2) Drainage (Amendment) Act 2023;
- (3) Brands Act 1928;
- (4) Pounds Act 1877;
- (5) Trespass of Animals Act 1955; and
- (6) Pesticides Act 1971.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry emphasises the importance of upgrading buildings and quarters, surveying agriculture stations to secure legal boundaries and prevent disputes, inspecting electrical systems to reduce safety hazards and investing in engineering works environment to support wellbeing.

Sir, the Ministry is engaging with the Ministry of Sugar to align policies that boost the productivity of agricultural land. This initiative is supported by \$168,750, which is allocated for the current year.

The Ministry of Agriculture in Fiji has incorporated the UN Sustainable Development Goals to key policies such as the 10-year Non-Sugar Agriculture Sector Policy, the Gender in Agriculture Policy and the five-year Strategic Development Plan.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is essential to continue supporting the sector, and I thank all stakeholders and Government for the continued support, collaboration and commitment which will sow the seeds for a sustainable and thriving Fiji tomorrow. With those remarks, Sir, I support the motion before the House.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I encourage the Ministry to take into account the feedback and recommendations raised during this debate and to remain transparent, accountable in its operations so that it collectively strives towards an agricultural sector that not only feeds our nation but also empowers people, foster economic growth and protects our environment for generations to come.

With those remarks, I formally conclude the debate on the Ministry of Agriculture Annual Reports for the year 2019 to 2022. I thank you, once again, for your invaluable contributions and your dedication.

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 today's sitting. Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.28 p.m.

ANNEXURE I

**Reply to Written Question No. 119/2025 tabled by the honourable Minister for Education
(Ref. Page 1665)**

**MINISTER FOR EDUCATION
(Hon. A.M. Radrodro)**

Reply to Question No. 119/2025 by Honourable H. Chand, is as follows:

- A total of 237 primary schools were identified with classrooms that have more than 30 students.
- Within these schools, there are 2,143 primary school classes where the student roll exceeds 30 students.

This reflects the need for continued investment in classroom infrastructure and targeted teacher recruitment. The ministry remains committed to ensuring a conducive learning environment for all students across Fiji.

ANNEXURE II

**Reply to Written Question No. 120/2025 tabled by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and
Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation (Ref. Page 1665)**

**DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER & MINISTER FOR TOURISM AND CIVIL AVIATION
(Hon. V.R. Gavoka)**

Reply to Question No. 120/2025 by Honourable P.K. Ravunawa, is as follows:

Background

A key driver of economic growth is Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). Given their dominance in the tourism private sector, support for their long-term recovery and expansion is critical to creating high-quality visitor experiences and facilitating community benefits from tourism.

Some data suggests up to 80 percent of the sector comprises SMEs - highlighting the prevalence of SMEs in the sector and the growing need for a structured support system that can optimise productivity and impact.

The Pilot Micro and Small Enterprise (MSE) Fund aims to support and empower tourism micro and small enterprises by providing financial assistance in the form of grants. It will focus on creating diversified tourism products and experiences.

In the 2024-2025 financial year, the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation was allocated \$400,000 in budget to pilot the programme. Implementing the programme as a pilot was to ensure the Ministry is able to roll it out in a manner which builds on longer-term sustainability and impact of access to finance programmes of Government.

Businesses that fall under the 'micro' category were eligible to apply for grant of up to \$15,000 with an allocation of \$150,000. 'Small' businesses were eligible to apply for grants up to \$25,000 with an allocation of \$250,000.

Key Application Highlights

The pilot was launched on 4th December, 2024, through Expression of Interest and closed on 28th March, 2025. A total of 75 applications were received. The geographical and demographic distribution of applicants are outlined in the table below.

Province	Percentage of Applications
Ba	36.0
Bua	1.3
Cakaudrove	20.0
Kadavu	2.7
Lau	1.3
Macuata	1.3
Nadroga/Navosa	20.0
Namosi	1.3
Ra	4.0
Rewa	2.7
Rotuma	1.3
Serua	5.3
Tailevu	1.3
Total	91.90%

Majority of applicants came from the Ba Province, which is expected, given its role as a tourism hub, accounting for 36 percent of total submissions. That was followed by Cakaudrove (21 percent) and Nadroga/Navosa (19 percent).

Tourism interests are concentrated in more developed or tourism-active Provinces. It potentially reflects the need for targeted outreach and support to encourage participation from underrepresented regions in future funding rounds.

Applications reflected a strong mix of tourism-related sectors, with the highest interest in tour operations and homestay accommodations. Other key sectors included marine transport, culture and heritage, and adventure tourism, alongside niche sub-sectors, such as agritourism and creative arts.

Majority of applicants (65 percent) are classified as micro businesses, while 32 percent fall under the small business category. Medium-sized businesses are not eligible for the Pilot MSE Fund.

Out of the 75 applications received, 38.67 percent were submitted by women entrepreneurs.

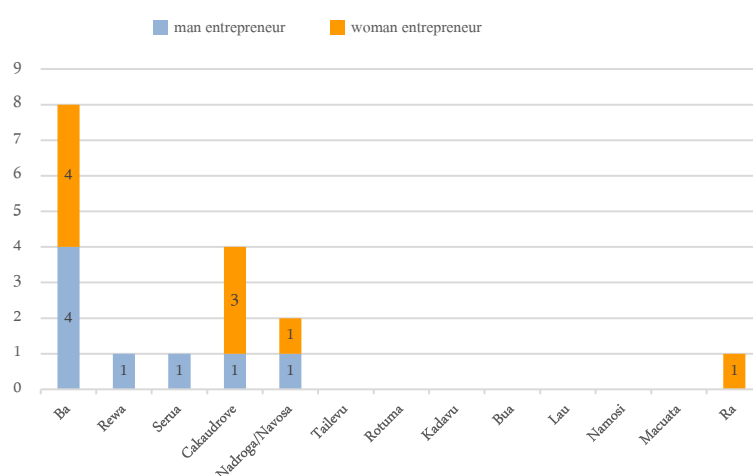
2024-2025 Benefitted Applicants

In the first batch of assessments, 24 applicants were shortlisted applications, of which 19 projects were approved for funding by the Selection Panel⁴, with a total Pilot contribution of \$293,686.

The geographical and demographic distribution of fund recipients is illustrated in the chart below. Of the 17 businesses that have received disbursements to-date, 47 percent are led by women entrepreneurs. Two businesses requested an extension to their one-third contribution due to time constraints and changes in supplier availability or internal fund allocations. These two applicants are expected to receive disbursement in the next financial year.

Chart 2: Demographic & Geographic Distribution Summary

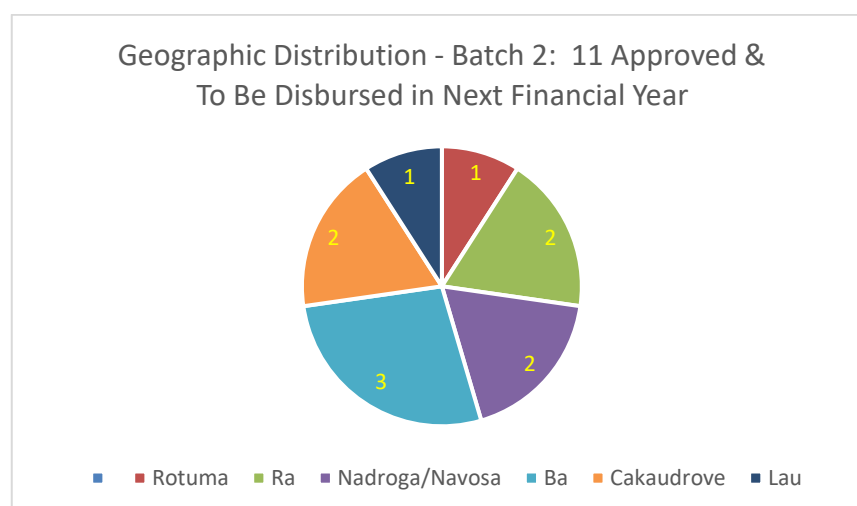
Demographic - Total 17 Disbursed Fund



The Second Selection Panel meeting assessed 16 shortlisted applications under Batch 2. From this group, nine projects were approved, six applications were placed on hold pending further information, and one application was not supported.

Thus, a total of 11 approved projects are scheduled for disbursement in the next financial year. The geographical distribution of fund recipients is illustrated in the chart below.

Chart 3: Approved Geographic Distribution Summary for Next Financial Year



⁴ Selection Panel consists of Public and Private sector representatives guided by a Terms of Reference

Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible, MSEs must be:

- Fijian citizens of 18 years of age and above;
- An existing registered enterprise in operation for two years;
- Registered entity must be majority Fijian owned (at least 51 percent);
- Engaged in tourism and where a majority share of revenue comes from the tourism sector including tour operators, activity providers, ground operators, hospitality, food and beverage, and transportation; and
- Ability to meet the one-third cash funding project cost with support documents satisfactory to the Ministry.

The Pilot provided grant funding for the purchase and construction of capital projects as well as operational items. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Improvement of products and experiences (including virtual, land and marine experiences).
- Visibility and awareness such as website upgrade.
- Adoption of technology to enhance visitor experiences.
- Amenities enhancements such as visitor areas or signage.
- Small-scale infrastructure such as trails, signage.
- Equity funding with financial institutions for capital expenditure and diversification purposes. Relevant FIs compliance and requirements will apply.

In its Pilot phase, the following tourism activities and experiences were encouraged:

- Activities that promote culture and heritage;
- Environmentally sustainable activities such as bird watching and trekking;
- Accessibility such as trails and signage;
- Upgrade and rejuvenation of heritage sites;
- Niche markets such as Agri-tourism and Wellness; and
- Natural parks such as forests and reef.

A Policy that highlights the criteria, exclusions, application process, grievances mechanisms, assessment criteria and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms was developed and widely published to ensure transparency.

Conclusion

Although the utilization of funds did not reach 100 percent in its inaugural year, the programme has demonstrated efficacy. Recipients in the 2024-2025 financial year included enterprises such as village tours, homestays, agri-tourism products, creative arts and marine tours.

For the 2025-2026 financial year, the Ministry initiated the second year of the pilot programme with an allocation of \$400,000. Applications became open as of 4th August, 2025.

ANNEXURE III

Reply to Written Question No. 121/2025 tabled by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation (Ref. Page 1665)


**DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER & MINISTER FOR TOURISM AND CIVIL AVIATION
(Hon. V.R. Gavoka)**

Reply to Question No. 121/2025 by Honourable I. Kuridrani, is as follows:

Key Highlights

In 2024, Fiji recorded a total of 982,938 international visitor arrivals, representing a 9.9 percent increase from the 894,389 arrivals in 2019, surpassing pre-pandemic levels. Our top five source markets by number of arrivals - Australia, New Zealand, the United States (US), China, and the Pacific Islands, collectively accounted for approximately 89.7 percent of total international visitor arrivals to Fiji in 2024.

The overall growth was driven primarily by strong performance in Australia, which remained the largest source of visitors. Arrivals from Australia rose by 24.03 percent, from 367,020 to 455,228, accounting for 46.31 percent of the total market share. Followed by New Zealand with 225,922 visitors, accounting for a market share of 22.98 percent, an increase by 9.67 percent compared to 2019. The United States recorded 107,821 arrivals, reflecting an 11.19 percent increase.

China remained one of Fiji's top source markets in 2024, contributing 30,535 arrivals, with a 35.07 percent variance from 2019 as travel volumes continue to rebuild. The Pacific Islands market performed strongly in 2024, with 62,227 visitors recorded - an increase of 14.45 percent compared to 2019, highlighting the continued strength of regional travel within the Pacific. Notably, Canada recorded the strongest growth rate among all source markets since 2019, with arrivals increasing by 52.09 percent to 20,181 visitors. This significant growth reflects the enhanced appeal of Fiji in the Canadian market, supported by the introduction of direct flight connections between Fiji and Vancouver.

While the European and Asian markets reported lower arrival numbers compared to 2019, these figures reflect a gradual rebound as international travel confidence continues to strengthen.

Conclusion

Australia and New Zealand continue to form the backbone of Fiji's tourism industry, collectively accounting for over 63 percent of total international visitor arrivals in 2024.

Canada emerged as a high-growth market, supported by enhanced air connectivity. The Pacific Islands demonstrated solid performance, indicating the strength of intra-regional travel.

The composition of Fiji's top five source markets remained largely consistent with 2019, with China replacing Continental Europe, indicating shifts in market dynamics. Fiji maintains a strong position in attracting regional travellers, with clear potential for sustainable growth, as international travel continues to stabilize.

Table 1: International Visitor Arrivals by Markets 2019 v 2024

Market	2019	% Market Share	2024	% Market Share	YOY Variance	YOY Variance %
Australia	367,020	40.97%	455,228	46.31%	88,208	24.03%
New Zealand	205,998	22.99%	225,928	22.98%	19,930	9.67%
USA	96,968	10.82%	107,821	10.97%	10,853	11.19%
Canada	13,269	1.48%	20,181	2.05%	6,912	52.09%
United Kingdom	16,856	1.88%	12,079	1.23%	-4,777	-28.34%
Continental Europe	36,058	4.02%	30,497	3.10%	-5,561	-15.42%
Japan	14,868	1.66%	9,474	0.96%	-5,394	-36.28%
South Korea	6,806	0.76%	2,088	0.21%	-4,718	-69.32%
China	47,027	5.25%	30,535	3.11%	-16,492	-35.07%
India	6,231	0.70%	5,678	0.58%	-553	-8.87%
Hong Kong	2,142	0.24%	875	0.09%	-1,267	-59.15%
Rest of Asia	21,532	2.40%	15,574	1.58%	-5,958	-27.67%
Pacific Islands	54,369	6.07%	62,227	6.33%	7,858	14.45%
Others	5,245	0.59%	4,753	0.48%	-492	-9.38%
Total	894,389	100.00%	982,938	100.00%	88,549	9.90%