

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

MONDAY, 29TH SEPTEMBER, 2025

[CORRECTED COPY]

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MONDAY, 29TH SEPTEMBER, 2025

The Parliament met at 9.40 a.m. pursuant to notice.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

Hon. Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka, Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Civil Service, Public Enterprises and Information

Hon. Prof. Biman Chand Prasad, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics

Hon. Siromi Dokonivalu Turaga, Minister for Justice and Acting Attorney-General

Hon. Pio Tikoduadua, Minister for Defence and Veteran Affairs

Hon. Ro Filipe Qaraniqio Tuisawau, Minister for Public Works and Meteorological Services and Transport

Hon. Aseri Masivou Radrodoro, Minister for Education

Hon. Charan Jeeth Singh, Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry

Hon. Dr. Ratu Atonio Rabici Lalabalavu, Minister for Health and Medical Services

Hon. Filimoni Wainiqolo Rasokisoki Vosarogo, Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources

Hon. Sakiasi Raisevu Ditoka, Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management

Hon. Alitia Vakatai Bavou Cirikiyasawa Bainivalu, Minister for Fisheries and Forestry

Hon. Agni Deo Singh, Minister for Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations

Hon. Sashi Kiran, Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection

Hon. Lynda Diseru Tabuya, Minister for Information

Hon. Ifereimi Vasu, Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts

Hon. Maciu Katamotu Nalumisa, Minister for Housing and Local Government

Hon. Tomasi Niuvalu Tunabuna, Minister for Agriculture and Waterways

Hon. Jese Saukuru, Minister for Youth and Sports

Hon. Viliame Naupoto, Minister for Immigration

Hon. Ioane Naivalurua, Minister for Policing

Hon. Mosese Dreacala Bulitavu, Minister for Environment and Climate Change

Hon. Esrom Yosef Immanuel, Assistant Minister for Finance

Hon. Sakiusa Tubuna, Assistant Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister

Hon. Lenora Salusalu Qereqeretabua, Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs

Hon. Isikeli Tuiwailevu, Assistant Minister for iTaukei Affairs

Hon. Iliesa Sovui Vanawalu, Assistant Minister for Education

Hon. Ratu Rakuita Solesole Sauramaeva Vakalalabure, Assistant Minister for Defence

Hon. Jovesa Rokuta Vocea, Assistant Minister for Rural, Maritime Development and Disaster Management

Hon. Aliko Bia, Assistant Minister for Information

Hon. Ratu Josai Bulavakarua Niudamu, Assistant Minister for Justice

Hon. Naisa Tatau Tuinaceva, Assistant Minister for Transport and Infrastructure

Hon. Penioni Koliniwai Ravunawa, Assistant Minister for Health

Hon. Inosi Kuridrani, Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Waterways

Hon. Kalaveti Vodo Ravu

Hon. Alipate Nagata Tuicolo

Hon. Taito Rokomatu Matasawalevu

Hon. Sachida Nand

Hon. Shalen Kumar

Hon. Inia Batikoto Seruiratu
Hon. Jone Usamate
Hon. Premila D. Kumar
Hon. Parveen Kumar Bala
Hon. Semi Tuleca Koroilavesau
Hon. Alvick Avhikrit Maharaj
Hon. Viam Pillay
Hon. Joseph Nitya Nand
Hon. Vijay Nath
Hon. Hem Chand
Hon. Rinesh Ritesh Sharma
Hon. Virendra Lal

Absent

Hon. Viliame Rogoibulu Gavoka, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation
Hon. Manoa Seru Nakausabaria Kamikamica, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications
Hon. Faiyaz Siddiq Koya
Hon. Sanjay Salend Kirpal
Hon. Ketan Kirit Lal

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Friday, 8th August, 2025, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to the September-October sitting period. I especially welcome the honourable Members who have been abroad on official and public tour and duties, or in their private capacities. We welcome you back home to our Fiji and to the Parliament this morning.

To those seated in the gallery and to everyone tuning in via television and online, welcome. Your continued interest and engagement with the workings of Parliament bring life to this democratic process, and we are delighted to have you following us along. Thank you for being part of this journey.

Honourable Members, please, bear with me this morning as I have some outstanding announcements to make.

Establishment of the Pacific Inter-Parliamentary Assembly

At the conclusion of the 5th Pacific Islands Parliaments Group (PIPG) Conference at Natadola on 28th August, 2025, it marked not a closure of the PIPG chapter, but the opening of the new one with rejuvenation and new sense of purpose for our community of parliaments in the region.

The 5th PIPG Conference was a historic milestone, marked by the establishment of the Pacific Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (PIPA). This new institution represents our collective commitment to deepening regional integration and amplifying the voice of our Pacific Parliaments on the global stage. I am confident that PIPA will serve as a beacon of cooperation, resilience and democratic governance for our region. I thank most sincerely the honourable Ministers, Assistant Ministers and Members of the Opposition who attended and supported the Conference throughout.

I also extend my heartfelt gratitude to His Excellency the President and the honourable Prime Minister for their wisdom and foresight, in allowing the Fijian Parliament to host this critical event. Their support has been instrumental in bringing this vision to life.

Fiji Youth Parliament 2025

Honourable Members, I wish to inform you that in our continued commitment and determination in nurturing the future leaders of this country, Parliament successfully hosted the 2025 Fiji Youth Parliament from 8th September, 2025 to 12th September, 2025. The initiative was part of our broader efforts to engage and empower young citizens through meaningful participation in democratic processes.

I extend my sincere gratitude to all the honourable Members who contributed to the training and mentoring of the Youth Parliamentarians, as well as those honourable Members who came to provide moral support during their mock parliamentary debate. Looking ahead before the general elections in the coming year, we anticipate hosting another Youth Parliament, as well as Women's Parliament, as forms of empowerment and encouragement for the youth and women participation in national politics.

Request for Extension - Standing Committee on Economic Affairs

For the information of honourable Members, I have received correspondence from the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, which was subsequently tabled with the Business Committee. The correspondence requested for the extension of time, pursuant to Standing Orders 121(1)(a), pertaining to the following Bills:

- (1) Credit Union Bill 2025 (Bill No. 29/2025) , which was referred to the Standing Committee on 7th August, 2025; and
- (2) Employment Relations (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Bill No... 27/2025), which was referred to the Standing Committee on 8th August, 2025.

The extension is granted, and the Standing Committee must, therefore, report back on the two Bills at the November-December sitting period.

Referral of Annual Reports

Honourable Members, please, take note of the following re-assigned Annual Reports, the:

- (1) Fiji National University 2024 Annual Report from the Standing Committee on Foreign

Affairs and Defence to the Standing Committee on Social Affairs.

- (2) Fiji National Provident Fund 2024 Annual Report from the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs to the Standing Committee on Social Affairs.
- (3) Fiji Broadcasting Corporation Proprietary Limited 2023 Annual Report from the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence to the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs.
- (4) Fiji Teachers Registration Authority 2022-2023 Annual Report from the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence to the Standing Committee on Social Affairs.
- (5) Office of the Prime Minister and Department of Immigration 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 Annual Reports from the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence.

Back to Office Report - 2025 Women's Practice Parliament Workshop

For the additional information of all honourable Members, the Back to Office Report for the Women's Practice Parliament Workshop which was held in Nukualofa, Tonga, and attended by honourable Premila Kumar, is now available in the Library for your perusal and reference. I extend my sincere gratitude to honourable Kumar for her timely report.

Independent Member - Opposition

Finally, please, kindly note that I had received official notification from honourable Sanjay S. Kirpal, who has informed the Speaker's Office that he shall now become an Opposition Independent Member for the remainder of this Parliamentary term. In that respect, I now recognise the honourable Leader of the Opposition's group as a Group of 13 Bloc.

PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND CERTAIN DOCUMENTS

The following Reports were tabled by the Ministers responsible in accordance with Standing Order 38(1), and referred to the relevant Standing Committee for deliberation, in accordance with Standing Order 38(2):

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

- (1) Reserve Bank of Fiji Insurance – Annual Report 2024 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 6 of 2025*)
- (2) Fiji Development Bank – Annual Report 2024 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 113 of 2025*)
- (3) Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport – Annual Report 2019-2020 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 96 of 2025*)
- (4) Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport – Annual Report 2020-2021 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 97 of 2025*)
- (5) Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection – Annual Report 2022-2023 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 58 of 2025*)

Honourable Members, please, take note that the following Reports is for information only and will not be referred to any Standing Committee.

- (1) Reserve Bank of Fiji Quarterly Review June 2025
- (2) Fiji Red Cross Society Annual Report 2024

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

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

- (1) Minister for Fisheries and Forestry;
- (2) Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection; and
- (3) Minister for Justice and the Acting Attorney-General.

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

Enhancing Aquaculture Product Value Chain and Market Access for Fiji Mabe Pearls

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, and ladies and gentlemen. *Ni sa yadra vinaka* and a very good morning to you all.

I rise to deliver a statement on enhancing our aquaculture product value chain and market access for the Fiji Mabe Pearls to access premium markets. I wish to inform the House that the Ministry, with the support of its partner, the Australia Centre for International Agriculture Research (ACIAR) has successfully established the Fiji Mabe Pearls value chain. Now, our communities are producing Mabe Pearls, and we are selling at the local premium markets, positioning this product as a luxury brand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me inform the House about the Mabe Pearl product and how it is cultured. The Mabe Pearls are cultured and produced by attaching half-spherical beads to the inner shelf surface of the pearl oyster shells. Subsequent coverage with nacre or secretion from the pearl oysters produces commercial pearls after a culture period of about 12 months in the ocean. They are then harvested, cleaned, and cut from the shell with a flat back, making them ideal for jewellery such as earrings and pendants.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a study conducted by the Ministry in partnership with ACIAR on the Value Chain of the Fiji Pearl Industry confirmed that around \$8 million worth of pearl handicraft items are imported to Fiji each year, targeting the international tourist market.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, based on this finding, the Ministry, with the support of ACIAR, commenced the research and development of the pearl oyster product to substitute imports of pearl handicrafts by harnessing the oyster supply with pearl jewellery and handicraft items to create more economic opportunities for our communities. Research and development on pearl oyster aquaculture started in 2006, with improvements to the pearl oyster spat collection programme to support the local pearl farmers, improvement of culture production technique, extensive training and capacity development of Ministry staff and farmers, and improvement of handicraft production techniques and market development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the primary purpose of this programme is not only for communities to improve economic opportunities, but also to tap into premium markets and to receive high profits and maximum benefits. The Mabe Pearls cultured pilot project started in 2006 in Viani, Cakaudrove and Raviravi in Macuata. Production from these farms is being bought from communities for market trials, and through these pilot farms, gaps were identified along the value chains, especially at the

production level, which has been addressed and improved.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, six community-based Mabe pearl farms have been established and are operating. This year, four new farms were implanted with Mabe pearl beads, bringing the total to 10 farms. A farm can consist of 200 to 300 pearl oyster shells, with an estimated value of FJ\$8,000 to FJ\$10,000, which can be earned per community-based farm in one cycle. The project is aimed to develop community-based enterprises and small businesses, especially for women and youths, to produce and sell marketable jewellery and handicraft products for both the domestic and international premium markets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the project supports strengthening technical and business capacities, improving market knowledge, and enhancing market access for Mabe Pearls. This collaborative effort has successfully established a partnership with Jacks Fiji – a leading retail company specialising in local handicrafts and luxury brands. In this partnership, our community farms produce Mabe pearls, which is processed and sold at Jacks Fiji to position the Fiji's Mabe Pearls as a luxury brand.

The Fiji Mabe Pearls are now available at Jacks Fiji's retail locations in Nadi, Denarau, Baravi, InterContinental Fiji Golf Resort, Shangri-La Hotel and the Marriott. If you are visiting the West, please visit one of these locations to witness a luxury brand farmed in our pristine ocean by our communities, carved and designed by our local artisans. This brand tells the story of community stewardship, resilience, perseverance, innovation and a shared purpose of sustainably utilising our ocean.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Minister the responsible, I wish to convey my deepest gratitude and appreciation to Jacks Fiji for this partnership and establishing the market for us. With the market secured, we have now established the Fiji Mabe Pearls value chain. We are positioned to strengthen the brand presence and expand, which comes with a demand for quality production. Hence, the Minister responsible, I take the opportunity to visit some of the farms and provide essential equipment, such as boats and engines to boost their production.

In December last year, I handed over 23-foot boat and a 60-horsepower engine to the Nasomo Ra Marama Handicraft Cooperative in Taveuni, and recently a 23-foot boat and 40 horsepower engine to the Nawaikama Women's Cooperative in Gau. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I officially opened the Savusavu Mabe Pearl and Handicraft Showroom in December last year, which serves as a hub for value adding and designing community farmed Mabe Pearls in Vanua Levu. Mabe Pearl farming has extended to the Nakorotubu, Rakiraki coastal area, with two newly implanted farms in Togovere and Malake this year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through this project, the Coalition Government has promoted and supported community values, including improving livelihoods, economic growth, food security, demonstration of traditional skills and knowledge through handicraft and jewellery design and community resilience. The work on producing the Fiji Mabe Pearls does not end with securing a premium market. The processes continue to ensure improvement in the value chain, optimisation of activities, fostering innovation and consistency in quality production.

Farming in the ocean is challenging and requires an adequate legal and administrative framework to manage and monitor the aquaculture zones. I am proud to say that through the Coalition Government, Parliament endorsed the Aquaculture Bill in December last year and the Ministry also launched its Aquaculture Development Plan of 2024 and 2028.

In closing, this achievement practically demonstrates our commitment to a sustainable blue

In closing, this achievement practically demonstrates our commitment to a sustainable blue economy, which utilises our ocean sustainably to empower coastal communities through sustainable livelihood, the preservation of traditional skills and ultimately contribute to economic growth.

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

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I congratulate the honourable Minister for making this Ministerial Statement on Mabe pearls. As we all understand, Mabe pearl is a new product that has been introduced into Fiji, and we commonly are aware of the pearl farming as an industry that was introduced by the Japanese. I think one of the good examples is the pearl farming within Savusavu Bay and around those areas.

As the honourable Minister has highlighted, Mabe pearl is quite different. The actual pearl is stuck with the side of the pearl itself and not the flesh of the pearl. The pearl grows out as a half circle pearl within the mother shell. The other pearls that we are normally aware of, is actually formed within the muscles of the pearl.

I understand also that the Ministry of Fisheries, with the help of the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIR), have intensified their support in farming in the Western Division and the Northern Division, and there has been recent visit aimed to progress this with the locals, especially in Vanua Levu and Viti Levu.

The joy of Mabe Pearls, Mr. Speaker Sir, is that it is not stringent conditions that is normally required by the normal pearl that we can see in Savusavu. The normal pearl will require very clean and pristine conditions to be able to prosper, but Mabe Pearls can be grown almost in any condition. That is why Ra has been chosen as one of the major places, and around the coast of Macuata and Bua, in between the mangroves and the shoreline.

While the mangroves provide the natural protection for the strong weather that can destroy these farms, it also can generate good conditions for Mabe Pearls to grow. I remember around Rakiraki, Nanuyakoto and Korotogo, there has been successful trials carried out and I am appreciative of the fact that the honourable Minister has spread the news. Tonga does not have any other pearls but Mabe Pearls. They have mastered the expertise to produce those Mabe Pearls, and it is their major product.

I must also congratulate the Minister for having the access to sell these pearls. I understand they have worked with Jacks Fiji, and this is a premium retail chain that will ensure that Mabe Pearls that is produced within Fiji can be marketed locally for our tourists and also for overseas markets.

I remember visiting the Mabe pearl farm in Raviravi, Macuata, where I understand the honourable Minister has also visited where the Ministry of Fisheries actually worked in partnership with the Women's Club in Raviravi, Macuata, where they have built their workshop, provided them with the tools and they now master the production of pearls, so it would be ideal for women's clubs around Fiji to look at the Raviravi Women's Club, as they have become very experienced and are experts in the production of pearls.

National Safe-Guarding Policy

HON. S. KIRAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of this House. Dear Fiji, Fiji's first Child Safeguarding Policy has been

passed by Cabinet - a significant milestone in strengthening Fiji's commitment to protecting every child from abuse and identifying and stopping abuse that might already be happening. We have committed both, under Fijian law and the international conventions, specifically the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to ensure every child is safe from violence, not only in schools and institutions, but also in their homes and in their communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Policy was developed through widely consulted process across Government agencies, the National Coordinating Committee for Children, civil society partners, private sector representatives and community groups, and I wish to thank UNICEF for their technical support in this process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Policy is built on simple but firm guiding principles.

- (1) Zero tolerance
Abuse, neglect and exploitation will not be tolerated under any circumstances.
- (2) Child-centred
The voices and rights of children must be respected, and their best interests must always guide decisions.
- (3) Shared Responsibility
Safeguarding children is not the job of Government alone - it is the duty of every individual and organisation.
- (4) Accountability
Those who fail to safeguard children have to face consequences.

These principles are not negotiable and leave no room for excuses, no space for silence and no tolerance for negligence.

Mr. Speaker, the reality is that too many of our children in Fiji remain unsafe today. Last year alone, the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection received 1,977 child welfare cases through the Child Helpline and our partner service providers. Alarming, 62 percent of these cases were linked to neglect, physical abuse and sexual abuse.

Children represent the largest victim category of all sexual offences reported to the Fiji Police Force each year. Mr. Speaker, Sir, 63 percent of all sexual offences in the past year were against children, including 29 infants below the age of five years. That was a total of 755 cases of sexual violence against children. In 2022, it was 70 percent with 34 infants below the age of five.

While the numbers seem to be decreasing, any child abuse is one too many. Evidence from the Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey, conducted by Fiji Bureau of Statistics with the support from UNICEF, shows that 80 percent of our children aged between 1 year to 14 years have experienced some form of violent discipline in the past month. The same data shows that one in five Fijian children suffered severe physical punishment, such as being hit in the face or head, or being subjected to repeated beatings. This is happening in all of Fiji, with 84 percent of children in rural areas and 76 percent in urban areas, experiencing corporal punishment in their homes.

The Violence Against Children in Fiji Scoping Study carried out by our Ministry, together with the University of the South Pacific and Fiji National University and supported by UNICEF, paints a similar picture, with child abuse and neglect common across the entire Fijian society. Each of this statistic represents an actual innocent Fijian child suffering harm in the places where they

should feel the safest. Violence against children is costing the nation dearly, with the Fiji Bureau of Statistics estimating it at 4.23 percent of our GDP, or roughly \$460 million each year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a child is left traumatised, and it takes a toll on their family, their community and on society at large, which manifests as emotional distress, health burdens, reduction in quality of life, and additional financial burdens on households and on sectors responsible for providing services in response to cases of violence.

This Policy is a national standard, Mr. Speaker. It is a guiding framework that applies across all Ministries, departments, NGOs, CSOs, faith-based groups, private sector, schools, community organisations, sports clubs, contractors and service providers. In simple terms, if you work with children you are bound by this Policy. This Policy requires:

- safe environments for children in schools, workplaces, communities and online spaces;
- risk assessments to identify dangers and prevent harm before it happens;
- child safe recruitment practices to ensure that unsafe individuals do not work with or near children;
- training for all staff, volunteers and contractors so that everyone understands their safeguarding duties;
- clear reporting systems so that abuse is never ignored or hidden; and
- strong disciplinary action against anyone who fails to uphold safeguarding responsibilities.

While this is a national framework, Mr. Speaker, each institution must tailor it into a practical, purposeful policy suited to its context. This ensures that safeguarding is not just written in documents, but embedded into the daily practices of schools, offices, businesses and community organisations.

Mr. Speaker, the National Child Safeguarding Policy also supports and strengthens other major reforms. It is directly aligned with the new Child Care and Protection Act 2024 and the Child Justice Act 2024. These laws set higher standards for child protection and justice systems, and this Policy provides the framework to make sure those standards are applied in practice. It also complements the new Adoptions Act, which guarantees that every child adoption decision is made in the best interests of the child. That Act also introduces clear and transparent rules for both, local and international adoptions.

Through this Policy, the Department of Children is preparing prospective parents in advance and the Ministry is establishing a national foster and adoption panel to secure safe, loving homes for our children. Together, these laws and this Policy forms a strong safety net, one that should protect children at home, in school, in care and in the justice system.

Mr. Speaker, the official launch is planned for next month. However, our Ministry has already begun awareness sessions with stakeholders to prepare for the rollout. The implementation guidelines have already been developed to ensure effective implementation across Government, civil society, community organisations and the private sector.

Mr. Speaker, this Policy is not only about rules and procedures, it is about building a culture of safety –

- a culture where our children feel secure in their homes, in their schools, in their villages, in their faith communities and in where they live;
- a culture where adults take responsibility, and institutions act quickly and decisively when risks are identified; and

- that is the culture this Government is determined to build.

Mr. Speaker, the message of this Government is firm - protecting children is not optional, it is non-negotiable. I am calling on our leaders in this House, in the private sector, the faith leaders, community leaders, civil servants and family elders, and I am calling on every citizen, to act with urgency to protect our children. Let us stand together across political lines to say with one voice, “Every child in Fiji deserves to be safe, every child in Fiji deserves to be heard and every child in Fiji deserves to be protected from all forms of violence”.

Mr. Speaker, Hindus are celebrating *Navratri* festival. May I take your permission to wish them all those who celebrate our well wishes, *bahut bahut shubh kamnaye*.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise to speak on the significant announcement of the National Child Safeguarding Policy approved by Cabinet. This is, without doubt, a moment for which this House and the nation can share a sense of collective pride.

Following the passage of the Child Care and Protection Act 2024 and the Child Justice Act 2024, this Policy represents the final foundational pillar of a modern holistic legal framework for the protection of our children. It shifts us from having laws to having a unified mandatory playbook for every institution that interacts with a child, a truly momentous advancement.

This Policy is a vital step that brings clarity, consistency, and a shared national standard to an issue that has, for too long, suffered from fragmented responses. It formalises our commitment under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and acknowledges that child protection is not just a job of the Police or a single ministry, but a whole of society mandate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we celebrate the drafting of this Policy, it is essential to understand that a policy is only as effective as its execution. The hard work begins now. We await the Minister's full statement, but before the applause fades, we must raise three critical ‘buts’ - three major operational hurdles that will determine whether this Policy becomes a genuine shield for our children or just another well-intentioned document.

The Policy mandates a fundamental change in how all sectors operate, and such a change comes with a significant cost. Currently, there is a gaping void between the Policy's aspirations and the visible dedicated resources needed to achieve them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need the Minister to detail the specific ring-fenced budgetary allocation that will go towards the operational cost of this Policy. This is not simply about printing manuals - this is about funding the newly established Department for Children, ensuring they have the independence and capacity to lead cross-sectoral efforts, and dedicating resources to the National Child Helpline to handle the inevitable increase in reporting that this unified policy will generate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Policy requires all teachers, nurses, police officers and community leaders to be trained in standardised safeguarding procedures and trauma-informed care. We need a clear, ambitious plan, not just a workshop schedule, to massively increase the number of trained social workers and counsellors, especially in our rural and maritime communities, where access to these vital services is often non-existent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a standardised framework is useless if institutions and individuals can breach it without consequence. This Policy must have a clear chain of accountability that is enforced

without fear or favour, regardless of the sector.

We require clarity on the penalty regime for non-compliant institutions. If a private school, a statutory body or a large NGO fails to adopt the mandatory procedures or train its staff, what are the progressive disciplinary measures? Will they face licence revocation, financial penalties or public reprimand? This Policy must supersede internal politics, otherwise, it will collapse under inter-agency inertia.

The Policy needs to explicitly outline the consequences of mandated reporters, who fail to report known or suspected abuse. The honourable Minister's statement must assure us that these penalties will be swift and transparent, sending an undeniable message that looking the other way is now a criminal act of commission, not omission.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we require an explicit commitment to using the new Policy, not just for reporting, but for real-time data evaluation. How will the Ministry track the efficacy of the Policy? We need to see clear annual targets for the reduction of new child abuse and neglect cases, demonstrating that the Policy is fundamentally changing the social fabric, not just processing more reports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Policy is an inspiring promise, but as leaders, our duty is to ensure that that promise is kept. We urge the honourable Minister to address these critical operational questions directly in her statement. For the sake of every child in Fiji, the time for policy pronouncements is over, but the time for accountable, resourced and preventative action is now.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think it would be an appropriate time to take our morning break, honourable Members. Before we do so, I acknowledge the presence and the safe return of the honourable Prime Minister for what I understand is a very exhaustive world tour. Parliament welcomes you back, Sir.

We will now suspend proceedings for a break and Parliament will resume in half an hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.22 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.05 a.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I invite you to join me in extending a warm welcome to the final year law students from the University of Fiji, Lautoka Campus. It is also my pleasure to acknowledge their Senior Lecturer, Mrs. Sainiana Radrodoro, whose guidance and dedication have, undoubtedly, shaped the academic journey of these aspiring legal professionals.

Your presence here this morning is deeply appreciated, and we are honoured to host you in this House, your Parliament. We trust that today's proceedings will offer valuable insights into the democratic processes and legislative functions that underpin our nation's governance. Once again, welcome to Parliament and thank you for joining us.

Honourable Members, we will resume with our third and last Ministerial Statement.

Strengthening Fiji Through Intellectual Property

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, *vinaka vakalevu ena nomuni tiko rawa na mataka ni siga nikua*, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, fellow honourable Members of this august House, the final year students from the University of Fiji, and members of the public here in Parliament and those joining us virtually through livestream media; *bula vinaka, namaste*, and a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the story of Fiji is not only written in books, it lives in the tangible heritage found across our islands. We see it in places like Buca Village in Cakaudrove, expressed through the *masi* cloth, or in your beautiful island of Kabara, carved into its *kumete* or *tanoa*, or in the Yasawa Islands, sung in its *meke* or *vakamalolo*. It is a story passed down through generations, a sacred trust that connects our past to our future.

To witness this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to understand that what we are seeing and enjoy is more than culture - it is our identity, and it is our dignity. It is the economic foundation for communities whose creativity is uniquely and powerfully Fijian.

This heritage is the soul of our nation. It was with the profound responsibility to protect it, that I travelled to Singapore last month, determined to ensure that on the global stage, Fiji's voice would not only be heard, but heeded.

From 25th August to 29th August, I had the honour of leading Fiji's delegation to the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) Regional Dialogue. I was ably accompanied by my former ambassador, Mr. Luke Daunivalu, who is a consultant with the Ministry of Justice and our Deputy Solicitor-General, Mr. Eliesa Tuiloma. Together, we engaged with our WIPO partners at the Regional Dialogue, and its purposeful bilateral discussions with the Singaporean institutions across law, justice and home affairs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the centre of the message we carried was this:

- (1) Our traditional knowledge, our art and our music are not relics of the past; and
- (2) they are dynamic economic assets for our present and future.

Thanks to the sustained support of partners like WIPO, the Small Island States like Fiji are no longer on the sidelines of the global intellectual property conversation. We are active architects, bringing unique priorities to the table.

In Singapore, we affirmed that Fiji and our Pacific family have moved from being observers to custodians, empowered to ensure our heritage is recognised, protected, and promoted on our own terms. The dialogue revealed a powerful and urgent truth - a robust intellectual property system is not a bureaucratic exercise. It is the key that unlocks the economic potential of our people's genius.

I heard how SMEs across Asia are using IP to build global brands, and I immediately thought of our creators and carvers in Vanuavatu, the home of my late colleague, Vatimi Rayalu; the designers in Suva; and the organic farmers in the highlands. Their ingenuity is the engine of a new diversified Fijian economy, but without modern protection, it is vulnerable to being copied, stolen and commercialised without their consent or benefit.

This brings me to a critical national priority, Mr. Speaker, the modernisation of the Fiji Intellectual Property Office, or what is commonly called FIPO. The current system is not equipped to meet this moment. We are serious about protecting the wealth inherent in our culture and innovation. FIPO must, therefore, be transformed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in last year's Budget, there were only five positions - Administrative Officer, Executive Officer for Trademarks, Clerical Officer Receiving and one Clerical Officer, Issuance. In this year's National Budget, we have a position for Director FIPO, one for Administrative Officer position, another for Executive Officer Trademarks, one Clerical Officer Receiving, one Clerical Officer Issuance, one Clerical Officer Searches, and three Graduate Interns from the Ministry of Civil Service.

Mr. Speaker, what I have found is that in the last 20 years, FIPO has not grown. When we left government and came back, it was as it was before. It is the Coalition Government that recognises the talent, the knowledge and imperative to expand, and we have done that with the appointment of a Director in the coming months.

For FIPO, it must be a dynamic and digitally enabled institution that does not just register rights but actively empowers our creators and safeguards of traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions from misappropriation. And I take note and thank FNU for holding the workshop last week in terms of traditional knowledge, and I invite academic institutions to continue to work in collaboration with the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs in this area. This is not just about preservation, is about ensuring that the economic benefits derived from heritage flow back to the communities.

Beyond the WIPO regional dialogue, the bilateral engagements were equally transformative. At the Singapore Ministry of Law, we witnessed the future of justice, e-litigation platforms and AI-assisted tools that make the system faster, cheaper, and more accessible. This is not a model we will copy, Mr. Speaker, but a powerful inspiration for our own digital system reforms.

The Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs observed the correction system built on profound belief in redemption. By focusing on skills training, counselling, and genuine rehabilitation, they are breaking the cycle of reoffending. This human-centered approach aligns with our Fijian values of compassion and giving a second chance. It is a model that we will explore, adapting to restore lives and strengthen our social fabric.

Furthermore, the use of biometrics for secure yet seamless border control offers a clear vision for Fiji. As our tourism industry flourishes and trade expands, such technology is no longer a luxury; it is a necessity for both, national security and economic efficiency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this visit yielded three concrete outcomes for Fiji, as follows:

(1) A seat at the table

We have firmly positioned Fiji as a vocal leader in shaping global IP norms that are inclusive and equitable for developing nations.

(2) A blueprint of modernisation

We have returned with actionable insights to drive digital reforms in our law and justice sector.

(3) Our partnership

We have laid the groundwork for a formal technical assistance programme with the Singapore Cooperation Enterprise. The path forward is clear; my Ministry will immediately begin work on two fronts:

- (i) Formalise partnership with Singapore focussing on digital justice and correction system.
- (ii) Urgently present to Cabinet within six months a comprehensive proposal for the modernisation and strategic repositioning of the Fiji Intellectual Property Office. This will include the necessary legislative reforms, digital infrastructure and the funding model to make FIPO a world-class institution.

Mr. Speaker, I return from Singapore with crystal clear conviction - Fiji may be a small dot on the world map, but our cultural footprint is vast. Our innovative spirit is rich, and the talent of our people is abundant. Our task is to build the institution that protect these treasures - institutions that serve all people with fairness, efficiency and the dignity they deserve.

This journey is about more than policies and systems, it is about the future we are building for the young girl in Buca, it is a future where creativity is not only honoured but protected, where her rights are safeguarded by a system that works for her and where her Fijian voice echoes confidently across the globe.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in response to the honourable Minister for Justice and Acting Attorney-General, Fiji's intellectual property law needs to be in conformity with its international obligations as agreed, particularly under the World Trade Organization Agreement and trade-related aspects of international property rights and the Paris Convention as well.

Mr. Speaker Sir, it is also to note that the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs Officials place emphasis on the protection of indigenous cultural heritage. However, what needs to be noted is that without proper structures, staffing and resources, even the new Act risks facing some of the shortcomings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I could go further in detail, some of the things highlighted are the efforts to increase the budget as stated by the Minister, that a director position has been approved. There is a manual counting process that still exists, which is time-consuming and labour-intensive, so depending on the volume of files and records to be processed, it takes several days to complete and requires the dedication of multiple officers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is an absolute need to digitise this process, and once the new Trademarks Act 2021, which is for amendment, is operationalised, that will provide access to the industrial property automation system, which will be instrumental in digitising records and streamlining operational processes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the honourable Minister has spoken about his visit to the WIPO Dialogue, on the ground in practicality it is not that easy because for the Government, what remains

a challenge is to find funding to improve capacity. They have been producing three deficit budgets for the last three years. Are they going to borrow more to increase their capacity and functionality of this? It is to be noted that national debt has, in fact, increased under this Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the honourable Minister speaks about his trip to Singapore, I was back home scrutinising the Trademarks (Amendment) Bill 2025. It is easy to give grand speeches, but in practicality and reality, it is not that easy at the national level. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Justice, there are six Clauses for amendment which was in front of this august Chambers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is one thing I would like to highlight that came from his Office was that Section 12 gives the Minister sole discretion, absolute power to approve or refuse applications involving indigenous words or expressions without requiring reasons for disclosure of materials.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the absolute power they have preached so much about in the elections and campaigns about one or two-men rule, so much power and democracy is coming back to Fiji.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Who put it there?

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- You ask his Office.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what is interesting to note is that there is no appeals process, despite the Minister having advisers, and that is what he has come from after that brand speech.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I got from the Ministerial Statement this morning that if Fiji's traditional knowledge, art and music are not relics of the past, but leaving economic assets my question to the Government is, why does the minister have absolute power? What if the minister changes tomorrow, which we have seen happening with this Government in the last three years - Attorney-General changing? What would happen then?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government talks about bringing change, democracy and moving away from absolute power. Please, live by your words. The Bill could have been drafted better in practicality.

Lastly, in the pursuit to protect indigenous names and expressions, the law should aim to balance cultural protection with business engagement. At the same time, this protection should not suppress these locals and indigenous names, while aligning Fiji with international standards and market exposure. I wish the honourable Minister brings in these amendments to the Bill before the House for debate.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, there is an urgent oral question for today. I now call on the honourable Leader of the Opposition to ask his Urgent Oral Question, pursuant to Standing Order 43(3). Oral Question No. 139/2025 will be omitted from the Order Paper.

(Oral Question No. 139/2025 omitted)

QUESTIONS

Urgent Oral Question

Plans to Address the Needs of the Sugar Industry Stakeholders

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

Given the fact that the Lautoka Mill is the only mill currently operational on Viti Levu, would the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry inform Parliament on the plans that are in place to address the needs and concerns of industry stakeholders for the remaining period of the 2025 crushing season?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope the honourable Leader of the Opposition is not grandstanding because if you had followed the recent visit that the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and I made to the Ba Sugar Mill, we, of course, made statements whereby we gave assurance to the farmers, lorry drivers, the millers and all stakeholders that we will look after them and make sure that the Lautoka Mill crushes every stick of cane. Even if the season has to extend, we will make sure that we will continue crushing as much as possible.

Before I elaborate further, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to give you an update about the Ba Sugar Mill - what has happened and what our plans are. As the Deputy Prime Minister and I went there, we were not allowed to enter the sugar mill because the NFA had cordoned the mill area. On the third day we managed to get into the mill, very near to where the fire took place. The damage is to an extent that we have to bring in experts from Australia to assess the mill's damage.

However, the CEO and the team assured us that if they get all the parts on time, they should be able to get the maintenance and fix the mill within two months. We have already informed the insurers. They have come in as well, and the whole mill is covered by insurance. Had the Rakiraki Mill been in operation today, we would not have this big pressure on Lautoka Mill. The problem is that we have a lot of arson on sugar cane farms now, and that is putting pressure on Lautoka Mill to accept burnt cane in the shortest possible time.

To answer your question, honourable Leader of the Opposition, we have assured all the farmers in all the districts, right from Rakiraki to Tavua and Ba, that we will give priority to your gain on a two-quota per farm on a daily basis.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, when they start interrupting, I feel like sitting down. When they ask questions, they are not prepared to listen.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Yes, too much hot air.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Hot air was when your government was there.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, we have assured that the mill will be in operation.

HON. P.K. BALA.- How?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- It is in operation now.

We have also assured the lorry drivers that all their transport costs will also be taken care of.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will now give time for supplementary questions. I will not entertain any statements. There has to be questions specifically addressing the major question that were posed in the first instance.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Thank you, Sir, for the supplementary question. I have two questions to the honourable Minister in regard to this. Has the honourable Minister considered a weighbridge for Lautoka Mill? Can he confirm, are there proper facilities for the truck drivers who take cane to the mill - three to four days away from home? Can you ensure that they have proper facilities to take care of them?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the weighbridge is already there, why put another weighbridge there?

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- No, simple as that. There are two weighbridges there.

(Honourable Member interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Address the Chair.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- That is immaterial. Number two, your question was about facilities. Yes, there are enough facilities at the Lautoka Mill for the lorry drivers.

MR. SPEAKER.- Let me ask the honourable Leader of the Opposition because it was his question.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Supplementary question. Honourable Minister, the two major concerns raised to me by the farmers when I visited them on Friday, this is not grandstanding. One, burnt cane. There were burnt cane in Rarawai Mill before the incident occurred, and you know what the Master Award says about burnt cane. What is happening to the burnt cane?

The other one is the major concern that the farmers have is the allocation of quotas. It seems that nothing is coming from FSC about the allocation of quotas. There are farmers in Rarawai, Penang in Rakiraki, Sigatoka, and in the Lautoka area. The allocation of quotas is not clear to the farmers, let alone the standing cane. Have you got any plans for leftover standing cane at the end of the crushing season? Those are the three major concerns from the farmers.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- For the burnt cane, prior to the mill being on fire, yes, we are considering some concession to the farmers. It is coming up. Number two, the quota, as I said, we only have one mill now, and canes are coming from all districts. Obviously, we are concerned about the farmers. We want to increase the quotas, but again, the mill has to have the capability to crush it out. My FSC team is definitely trying to assist the farmers with that.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, can the honourable Minister assure this Parliament that the penalty to farmers on the burnt cane will be suspended for this season? Secondly, can there be an increase on the cane transfer allowance for the lorry operators because the \$15 announcement that they have made, that was already in place. Can that be increased?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the allowance that honourable Bala is talking about, this \$15 is additional to what we are all allowed prior to this transfer. So, if a lorry operator was getting \$35 from Rakiraki, he will be getting another \$15, which makes it \$50; that is there. Secondly, for waiver of penalty, again, as I said, there is a Master Award. We are working with the Tribunal to see how best we can accommodate it.

MR. SPEAKER.- Last supplementary question.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir and I congratulate the honourable Minister for his answers, doing his best to answer this big chaotic situation that we find ourselves in. I think it is something of interest to all of us in this country, because sugar is so important. Two-pronged question: obviously, the delay in the time which it takes to process the sugar will depend on the sugar mill.

The first part of the question, how soon do we think we can get Rarawai Mill back in full commission to be able to shorten this time? Secondly, as a result also, because of these difficulties, the farmers will be facing more labour costs in terms of having to keep people available, the cane cutters, et cetera. Will there be any attempt to try to alleviate the pressure that they face as a result of that?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think I may have to answer a dozen questions, but thanks for your intervention to say that this is the last question.

If every part comes on time, with the wires supplied locally, we may be able to complete this in two months. That is what I have been told. I will not try to lie in this House. Secondly, about the additional cost - the labourers. Again, we sympathise with the farmers. We have been giving them additional \$3 per tonne for manual labour and we will see how best we can assist them. I will not commit at this stage now.

Oral Questions

Fiji Government's Fiscal Measures – Quarters 3 and 4 (Question No. 131/2025)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ asked the Government, upon notice:

Given the ADB's April 2025 forecast of 3.0 percent GDP growth and inflation of 2.9 percent in May 2025, can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics inform Parliament what new, targeted fiscal measures beyond the general budget will the Government implement in Q3 and Q4 to ease the cost of essential goods for low-income households, and how will their impact be assessed over the next six months?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a very good question from honourable Maharaj. The ADB has projected Fiji's growth at 3 percent in 2025, but our own Macroeconomic Committee's forecast as of June 2025 puts our growth projection to 3.2 percent for the year.

The Macroeconomic Committee undertook a robust assessment of the economy in June. They had taken into account a number of factors, such as the global slowdown, ongoing trade wars, geopolitical tensions, and downward revisions to our trading partners growth outlook. New Zealand, for example, has been in a recession, varying speeds at which some central banks around the world have reacted on the impact of government expenditure on the overall economy.

On the basis of that, to arrive at the revised growth projection of 3.2 percent for 2025. For 2026 and 2027, the growth is expected to be very broad-based and return to its long-term trend of around 3 percent to 3.5 percent. The services sector remained the main contributors to growth, followed by the industrial and primary sectors.

The Macroeconomic Committee is currently relooking at the projections and given the assessment they are making, given the level of investment consumption activity in the economy and

performance of the resource-based sectors, we are confident that the growth will be revised further upwards. That is very good news, Mr. Speaker, Sir. At the global level, the uncertainty from the US trade tariffs has eased, which has kind of provided us with a great deal of certainty, not just here but globally.

The other positive aspect of the international situation is that the crude oil price, fortunately, continues to be below the US\$70 per barrel mark, which is again helpful to us, despite the geopolitical tensions which could have potentially led to the increase in price. Some of us were kind of expecting that, and we did take that into account very carefully when we formulated the budget.

We are also seeing globally some of the major central banks are actually cutting interest rates, including Australia and New Zealand, as inflationary pressures in those countries also eased, particularly in US, Australia, UK and New Zealand. I think that helps strengthen the outlook for the major trading partners and key tourism source market for us.

At the domestic level, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the consumption spending remains very strong, supported by high consumer confidence, investor confidence, and it has picked up significantly – supported with increased private sector lending and low interest rates. The expansionary fiscal stance of Government is also supporting economic activity and business activity in general, including the remittances which have remained very strong.

I want to bring to Parliament's attention that the Fiji Bureau of Statistics has recently released the GDP numbers under the new 2019 base. All these while we were operating on the 2014 base. We did that because the recent economic structure shows a lot of changes, and there are trends which show that very clearly. When we look at the inflation, the Fiji Bureau of Statistics recently released the Consumer Price Index. This is very important, because there is a lot of misinformation about inflation and cost of living and especially some coming from the other side.

The 2019 Consumer Price Index rebase, which is based on the 2019 and 2020 Household Income Expenditure Survey, actually highlights notable shifts in consumer preferences, prompting structural changes in the food and non-alcoholic beverages, education, tobacco, narcotics and the communication categories. Under the updated 2019 base year, monthly inflation for the period January to August has averaged - negative (-1) percent, a clear indication that the overall consumer prices have fallen when compared to the same period in 2024. These are independent figures, honourable Kumar, these are not my figures.

Inflation, on top of that has been negative territory for the last seven consecutive months, which means that since February this year, overall prices have been coming down compared to the same period last year. Inflation rate was recorded at -3.5 percent in August 2025, compared to 3.8 percent last year.

Coming to honourable Maharaj's question - what new targeted fiscal measures beyond the general budget? You know this and the people of this country know this. We put out an expansionary budget, but we also assessed what was happening with respect to consumer spending, what was happening to the prices. We further added to that and reduced the VAT from 15 percent to 12.5 percent because we realised that our economic growth was still very high, consumption activity was high, even with reduced VAT, we are still going to collect, if not the same amount of revenue, probably more. So, the combined effect of VAT reduction and keeping the 22 items zero-rated, that in total, we are adding about \$500 million directly into the pockets of our people.

On top of that, duty reductions as we know from 42 percent for some of the items, to 32 percent, to 15 percent on things like chicken portions, chicken wings, drumsticks, offals, zero duty

on some of the other meat products. In the last budget, we reduced duty on frozen fish, including salmon from 15 percent to 0 percent. I am told that a lot of supermarkets are seeing a lot of good sales and we have everyday items. Whether you talk about potatoes, garlic, onion, tea, cooking oil, et cetera, these all have attracted zero duty, including some of the fruits and vegetables.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have put in some very important measures, including the task force between FRCS, Ministry of Finance, Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission and Consumer Council of Fiji to ensure that the price reduction that we anticipated as a result of our policies are actually being passed onto the consumers. I want to thank all the businesses who have done that and those that have not, we will make sure that they do. So, apart from that, there are several measures in the budget with respect to expenditure measures, whether you look at 10 percent reduction in bus fares, whether you look at the continued subsidy, plus, apart from the expenditure side, honourable Maharaj we have also looked at the income side.

Since we have come into Government, minimum wage has gone up from \$4 to \$5. In fact, we started with \$4 when we came in, we increased the salaries of the civil servants. We are looking at expenditure that is having a very clear impact on the incomes of farmers as well. So, high cane prices, high rice prices, subsidies for fertiliser and weedicides, et cetera, is heading towards growth in income. These are measures that are giving relief to a lot of consumers in the country and the official figures are very clear.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics for his comprehensive answer and relating to us the measures that will be taken for the next couple of months and years to reduce the burden on our consumers, especially with regards to the reduction of VAT.

Can the honourable Minister confirm in this House in either yes or no whether the increase of VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent was an increase burdened on the consumers, which is now being reduced and is a strategic plan to be reduced in future to reduce the cost of living - a policy that went wrong for past two and a half years?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is up to honourable Maharaj to ask a question and it is up to me to answer the question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me give them a little bit of history because this is important. VAT rate from 2008 to 2011 was 12.5 percent. It is their leader at that time who executed the *coup* and had a devaluation of the Fiji dollar by 20 percent in 2009. We had 15 percent VAT from 2011 to 2016 with no exemption. Then they brought it down to 9 percent, and on the side, they had ECAL, STT, and some people were paying about 25 percent tax if you went and ate in a restaurant.

Then, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they had zero percent, nine percent and 15 percent, and Government was losing close to \$300 to \$400 million in revenue because people were charging 15 percent and paying Government 9 percent, charging 9 percent and paying Government zero. When we came in, we removed the 9 percent, we added zero percent and 15 percent, and we made sure that we collected more than \$400 million to \$500 million, and that money went into raising social welfare allowances, giving subsidy to the farmers and raising people's support. This is what we did. So, the answer is an emphatic, no! People actually benefited from the reform that we did and the amount of revenue that we are collecting now.

Honourable Premila Kumar has forgotten that. I saw her post on *Facebook* which was completely misleading. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a government that has been transparent, open, accountable, and the benefits of the reform that we undertook in the 2023 Budget is now showing,

and the people are happy and supporting what we did.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, even though I did not say a word but he read my lips. Now, let me just respond in my question.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Your question?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Yes, it is a question. I have got a minute.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Consumer Council data says otherwise. Large eggs (720g) in 2022, it was for \$5.97. In 2025, it is \$8.67.

HON. J. USAMATE.- There you go!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Frozen mixed vegetable, in 2022, it was \$4.18, now it is \$6.04. Cocoa (250g), it was \$7.29, now it goes up to \$9.45, and I can give you a long list.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, will the honourable Minister further reduce the VAT from 12.5 percent, down to less than 10 percent, so that people can deal with their cost of living?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, she is hoping that that will get some political points for her, but let me remind her. Honourable Premila Kumar is a bit of an economist too, so she knows that there is a basket of goods that we are looking at, and when you calculate the Consumer Price Index (CPI), you are actually looking at the CPI. Of course, some prices would have gone up.

You know you cannot expect, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to say that the price of eggs in 2010, 2011 or 2012 was this much and is going to be the same in 2026. That is the kind of warped logic that honourable Premila Kumar is using. You can go back to 2016, or go back to 2011, and say the price of potato was this much, and you expect the price of potato to be the same today? No!

However, what we are saying, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government has taken decisive steps to ensure that our people are supported not only in terms of their policies to reduce prices such as duties, VAT, but we have also taken decisive action to raise people's income. Honourable Kumar, if the price of butter goes up in New Zealand from where we are importing all our butter, even with zero duty or even with zero VAT, the prices will go up. That simple!

What we need to do is to focus also on the income side, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and that is what this Government has done - minimum wages, salaries of the civil servants, you look at the wages in the councils, various sectors is much higher than \$5. All these are measures that this Government has put in place to address the cost of living.

Honourable Kumar, I think the explanation is very simple, and I hope you understand that.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will entertain one last supplementary question from the honourable Leader of the Opposition.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I like it when the honourable Minister talks about independent figures, because during his time here in the Opposition, he has his own set of figures. He always questions the figures that come from the government at that time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, how effective is this taskforce? How many places in Fiji have they visited? We still hear from our people that the cost of essential goods keeps increasing or is still high. So,

how effective is this taskforce? Which places have they visited?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Again, I have to remind the honourable Leader of the Opposition respectfully that he is talking about the independence. We did not check and remove the Head of the Bureau of Statistics, they did that.

(Honourable Opposition Members interject)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- None of the institutions under their reign was independent, Mr. Speaker.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Under this Government, we have provided the most transparent, accountable and independent assessment of what is happening in the economy.

The problem with the Opposition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is they do not like good news. My advice to them is sometimes if you praise the good news and accept the good news, it is good for you. The good news is, that we have had three consecutive years of good economic growth, our inflation rate is going down, our cost of living is going down, in many respects the income of our people are going up, so that is a good story for Fiji.

Talk about the good story! Do not go and lie to the people when you are having grog with them. Raise it in the Standing Committee. That is the reality, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I think the honourable Leader of the Opposition should understand that if you go to a supermarket, as I have said, their prices have gone up. For example, if you ask someone about the price of butter, they will tell you that the butter price has gone up. Then you come into this Parliament and say, “Oh, the people are saying that the cost of goods are going up”, that is not a responsible statement to make in Parliament.

The long and short, Mr. Speaker, is this - Government's policies are working. It is effective, results are showing, and the taskforce is doing a good job. They have gone around, and it is not as if they are going to police every little corner shop in the country but generally, there is a surveillance - a taskforce that is able to see if there is undue reluctance on the part of businesses to pass down the prices to the consumers. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Update on Fiji and Vanuatu MOU
(Question No. 132/2025)

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

Can the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Civil Service and Public Enterprises update Parliament on the recent signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Fiji and Vanuatu on development co-operation?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his question - it gives me an opportunity to inform the nation of something that we have recently completed.

The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed as part of our discussions and bilateral meetings at the recently completed Pacific Islands Leaders Forum in Honiara, Solomon

Islands. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the co-operation and relationship between Vanuatu and Fiji has been long running. You will remember that we participated in the administration of some of the departments in Vanuatu when they gained independence in 1980, when it became Vanuatu. Prior to that, it was New Hebrides, administered by France and the British. Since then, we have been cooperating.

The last Memorandum lapsed in 2016. We have always been cooperating in the administration, and in the areas of education and medicine, so the MOU that we signed two weeks ago was a continuation of the understanding. Even prior to those dates, we have had a sizeable Vanuatu community - Ni-Vanuatu community in Fiji. One very prominent group lived in Baba, Levuka. They provided Fiji with some of the best weightlifters in our national teams.

The MOU that was signed on the 10th of this month, was to enhance the existing friendly relationship between Fiji and Vanuatu, recognising that the stronger economic and development cooperation between the two parties will contribute to the achievement of shared political, economic, environmental and social priorities, including the improvement of the living standards of their respective peoples.

We recognise the common challenges faced by both parties - Vanuatu and Fiji, and shared interest to promote prosperity, security and good governance in the Pacific region. We all know that we have been cooperating with them during their times of natural disasters, not based on any MOU, but just natural affinity, natural care and neighbourly care. So, we talked, and Cabinet decided to agree to the formalisation of another successor agreement.

There are various articles to the MOU and agreement. The areas of development cooperation cover bilateral trade, investment, tourism, education, youth and human resource development, labour mobility and volunteerism, immigration, commerce, retail, taxation and customs, fisheries cooperation, land and air, sea transportation, health and pharmaceuticals, climate change and environment, disaster risk reduction and disaster risk management, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, security, energy, agriculture and livestock, ICT and sports cooperation, public works, and we are, at the moment, talking about a common border issue which is going very well on both sides.

Notwithstanding the areas enumerated above, the parties may, through exchange of letters, widen the coverage of this framework to include other sectors, not specifically referred to in Article 2 that I have said.

On Article 3 – Political Consultation, the party will establish regular consultations at the senior officials level to discuss modalities for extending the deepening cooperation between the two sides. Consultations will be held on a biennial basis, with a venue for consultations alternating between Fiji and Vanuatu.

On Article 4 – Funding and personnel, all cooperative activities pursuant to the Memorandum are to be undertaken, subject to the availability of funds and personnel. The party will be responsible for their respective personnel and expenses incurred from the implementation of any joint projects and/or activities under this MOU.

On Article 5 – Executing Agency, the e parties shall communicate through normal diplomatic channels via an appointed executive or executing agency on all activities undertaken under the memorandum.

Article 6 is on implementation. Article 7 is on amendment and review of Memorandum. Article 8 is on confidentiality. Article 9 will come into force at the end of duration. We signed this

on 10th September, by the Prime Minister of Vanuatu, honourable Jotham Napat, and I, on behalf of the Republic of Fiji.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the honourable Prime Minister for that comprehensive answer. I would like to declare my interest; I do business with the Ministry of Health in Vanuatu as well. One of the major factors in agreements between Fiji and Vanuatu, even the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, is logistics in transferring the goods from Fiji to Vanuatu. It is five times more expensive when bringing in goods from Australia to Fiji, than to send goods from Fiji to Vanuatu, and in doing trade, we tend to lose out on freight costs that is being paid. Is there any talks with regards to reducing the logistic cost between these Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) countries? The trade is very good, but the only place where we tend to lose is when it comes to freight both, air and sea. It is very expensive. Are there any negotiations in terms of direct logistics from Fiji to Vanuatu and other MSG countries?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that can be a solution with the actual players who are involved in the trade, as well as our transport agencies, whether it be seaport or airport. The port charges is the major issue, particularly with Fiji Ports Corporation Limited running as a commercial entity and shipping agencies with their logistics and expenses. However, it can be resolved if it is brought up to the attention of the Government.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question is to the honorable Prime Minister is, was there any evaluation undertaken before signing the MOU, just to assess the financial or resource commitments by each Government to support the cooperation activities related to development? In other words, was any analysis undertaken before signing the MOU to understand the cost implications on both the countries?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honorable Member would have heard that I mentioned that they equally contribute to the funding in the cooperation.

Relocation of Nabua Muslim League Squatter Tenants
(Question No. 133/2025)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government update Parliament on the progress of the relocation of squatter tenants from Nabua Muslim League Settlement?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the question before the House this morning. I would like to thank the honorable Member for his question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this question should have been addressed 10 years ago. However, before I respond, I would like to first congratulate the National Fire Authority (NFA) Queen, Ms. Rhyelle Aisea, for winning the 2025 Hibiscus Festival. I wish to thank all the hard-working men and women of NFA, who worked tirelessly to make this possible, together with the Ministry of Housing and Local Government and all its agencies, and the full support of the Rotuman community here and abroad. This is, indeed, a milestone achievement for NFA for winning the title for the first time, after taking part in the two previous festivals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Nabua Muslim League Settlement is located in a suburban centre and is one of the most densely populated informal settlements, comprising over 400 households. Many of these families had migrated from rural areas in pursuit of better livelihood, access to employment and

educational opportunities for their children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the past decade, previous governments have undertaken multiple socio-economic surveys within the Nabua Muslim League Settlement, but there was less action taken to address the needs of residents living in this informal settlement. The first survey was done in 2015, and the number of houses kept on increasing from 260 to 314 in 2020, to 419 in 2025. This is a reality we must confront with urgency and resolve, ensuring that future surveys are not just exercises in data collection, but catalysts for real and impactful change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government recognised the need to address the challenges faced by informal settlements and remains committed to improving the living conditions of affected families. In the case of Nabua Muslim League Settlement, eviction notices were issued to the sitting tenants in December 2024 by the Fiji Muslim League, who is the landlord, prompting immediate Government intervention.

Following the issuance of notices, Mr. Speaker Sir, the Minister of Housing convened a meeting, first with the Fiji Muslim League, before a meeting with affected families, to listen to their concerns and also to reassure them of Government support. Engagement between these two parties was constructive, and many families expressed relief in the application of the Ministry's proactive approach and willingness to collaborate on sustainable solutions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry undertook a comprehensive three-week socio-economic survey to assess the status and needs of the tenants. The data collected is currently being reviewed to inform practical relocation strategies, which will be presented to Cabinet for endorsement. The relocation plan aims to prioritise access to essential services, security of tenure and proximity to employment and education hubs.

In the current financial year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has been allocated a budget of \$2.2 million to identify and acquire a suitable land for the relocation of these affected families. Concurrently, we are developing a Relocation and Resettlement Policy for Evicted Families from Informal Settlements. This Policy will serve as a guiding framework to ensure that families are adequately supported throughout the transition process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to inform this august House that the Ministry has identified a greenfield site near Koronivia in Nausori for the relocation. Plans for preliminary infrastructure works that will include road access, drainage and utility connections are currently underway. The Ministry is also working closely with stakeholders, like the iTaukei Land Trust Board and the Ministry of Lands to finalise lease arrangements and ensure legal clarity for the relocated families.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is also formulating a First Home Grant Assistance package to support evicted families who qualify for Housing Authority lots. It is something that we have discussed with the executive management board of Housing Authority for families that have been evicted in this informal settlement, not only in Nabua, but also in other areas around Suva, to be given a dedicated lot to help these affected families. Within the Housing Authority developed subdivisions, a designated number of lots have been allocated to the Ministry specifically for low-to-middle income earners evicted from informal settlements. This grant programme will be implemented following Cabinet endorsement of the Relocation and Resettlement Policy.

Mr. Speakers, Sir, very interesting to note that several households from this Settlement have also expressed their interest to return to their villages. This is particularly for the itaukei community. The Ministry has incorporated this option to the Policy and is currently consulting with relevant Government agencies to ensure that appropriate support mechanisms are in place for these families.

The Ministry is also collaborating with Habitat for Humanity Fiji on a greenfield project aimed at relocating families that had been served with eviction notices. In this financial year, the Coalition Government has allocated over \$900,000 to Habitat for Humanity Fiji to undertake the scheme and engineering plan to identify land in Makosoi, that is closer to Pacific Harbour, including the construction of three houses.

Not only that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have also had consultations and discussions with the Public Rental Board (PRB) for those families that can be absorbed into Housing Authority, if they are given spaces that are vacant in PRB flats and be given the opportunity to relocate to some of these vacant flats.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, previous governments have struggled to implement consistent policies for our informal settlements, leaving sitting tenants vulnerable to eviction. However, we remain steadfast in this commitment to delivering a relocation programme that is inclusive, transparent and responsive to the needs of our people. We understand, Sir, the emotional and logistical challenges that come with eviction and we are working diligently to ensure that affected families are supported.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reaffirm the Coalition Government's commitment and dedication to addressing the plight of families living in informal settlements. Through strategic planning, interagency collaboration and community engagement, we are laying the foundation for a future where every Fijian has access to safe, secure and decent housing.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not want to engage myself in any debate of the 10 or 20 years, but what I want to know, is there been any amount determined for the relocation cost?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have already mentioned that in this year's budget, we have been allocated close to \$2.2 million. This amount is to assist the Ministry in acquiring a greenspace so that we can go in and develop before we start relocating the affected families.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question to the honourable Minister, is whether \$2.2 million allocated for this relocation is specifically for Nabua Muslim League or for some other relocation as well?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in fact, we are looking forward to parcels of land, so for this particular parcel of land in Koronivia, we are targeting those who have been served with notices in the Nabua Muslim League Settlement, as well as other areas around Suva who have been served with eviction notices, even for the Bhindi Subdivision for close to more than 50 families. There will be another 100 families served with eviction notices, so we are looking at these two land.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to that, we are also working with agencies, like the Public Rental Board as well as Housing Authority, to assist in the relocation of those affected families.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Sir, my question was not answered. I specifically asked whether \$2.2 million allocated for relocation is for Nabua Muslim League or is it for other relocation as well?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the honourable Member listened well to my response, I mentioned that it covers Nabua Muslim League Settlement, as well as those families that have been served with eviction notices by other landlords.

Transfer of Compensation Processing from ACCF
(Question No. 134/2025)

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations update Parliament on the impacts and advantages of transferring the processing of compensation from ACCF to the Ministry?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations had been handling workmen's compensation cases since the enactment of the Workmen's Compensation Act in April 1965.

During the 2018-2019 Budget process, and without prior consultation, the role of the Accident Compensation Commission of Fiji (ACCF) was expanded to include employment and school accident compensation effective from 1st January 2019.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, although the functions were transferred to ACCF, my Ministry continued to assist particularly in the areas of the two-thirds wage payments during recovery from injury, occupational disease investigations and health investigations. So, the actual spadework was still being done by my Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must acknowledge the interim ACCF Board for its correct decision to transfer employment and school accident cases back to the Ministry effective from 1st June, 2024. The transfer has brought several important impacts and advantages like better alignment with employment laws.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry already manages Occupational Health and Safety at Workplace employment issues. Bringing employment and school accident cases under our direct responsibility ensures a streamlined approach.

The National OHS and Workers Compensation Service integrates compensation with OHS prevention strategies, such as workplace inspections, statutory plant and machinery inspections, non-destructive testing, design vetting, chemical and hygiene audits, training and awareness programmes, and enforcement. These initiatives aim to reduce workplace accidents and boost productivity.

On centralisation of services, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the transfer, my Ministry has become a true one-stop shop for workers, dependents of deceased workers and pupils. They no longer need to visit external service providers or multiple offices to follow up on their cases on compensation payments.

On faster resolution of cases, my Ministry already has the system, expertise, and staff to manage these cases efficiently. The workers' compensation team, led by the Deputy Secretary for OHS, and supported by trained staff with professional qualifications in OHS and workplace safety, operates under clear standard operating procedures with definite timelines.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the processes for employment and school accident cases are as follows:

- (1) The employer or the school's controlling authority are required to notify the Ministry of Employment on school accidents.
- (2) Upon receipt of the notification, the applicant also completes the application form for compensation.

- (3) Once the recovery period of the injured worker or student is completed, they are referred for final medical assessments and to determine the degree of permanent disability. The lump sum compensation claim is calculated accordingly, and the injured worker and students are compensated accordingly by the Ministry, through the budgetary allocation provided by the Ministry of Finance, which is \$7 million for this financial year.
- (4) Stronger enforcement and compliance, our OHS inspectors have the authority to enforce safety standards and penalise non-compliant employers, thereby reducing accidents.

In the last financial year, the Ministry received 48 complaints from injured workers on the non-payment of the two-thirds weekly wages. Through employer engagements and joint meetings, Mr. Speaker, Sir, 44 cases were resolved, while four cases remain under legal review by the Office of the Solicitor-General. Mr. Speaker, Sir, linking compensation with enforcement promotes more responsible behaviour from employers and school authorities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, transferring the processing of employment and school accident cases to the Ministry saves the Government \$1.2 million annually, as there is no more outsourcing to other service providers, and the entire processing is done by my Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this august House will note that in the five years that it was outsourced, the people in the Government have lost \$6 million. This could have been saved.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, finally, my Ministry has presented the Work Care Bill 2025 to this august House in April this year, which is now before the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs. This Bill seeks to address challenges under the Accident Compensation Act 2017, including the current reliance on application forms alone for processing employment and school accidents.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my seat, I wish to join my colleague, honourable Nalumisa, in congratulating the new Miss Hibiscus, and also to thank my OHS Team from the Ministry for working long hours to ensure that no mishap took place during the week.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just wanted to express that the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs is actually carrying out the exercise on public consultations on the Bill that the honourable Minister has dwelled on this morning. Let me state that the analysis that we are receiving is quite different from what the honourable Minister has stated here in Parliament.

My question to the honourable Minister, was there any cost benefit analysis done in the action that has been taken to transfer the responsibility from ACCF back to the Ministry of Employment? While the honourable Minister is highlighting the cost around \$6 million of this transfer, did they actually work out what savings, if there is any, that will benefit from this exercise?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his question. I have alluded to this in this House and in the past as well that there is a state saving of \$1.2 million per year, which was actually going to a private provider, as well as a \$300,000 package to the CEO of ACCF; that position has been taken away. It is not there anymore. The entire exercise is now carried out by my Ministry and the staff in my Ministry are competent, the same staff who had been there for all this while are the ones who are actually carrying out the responsibility.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for his answer and I believe he always alludes to the cost that is saved by bringing cases back from ACCF to Workmen Compensation. Being with the Ministry, one of the issues was the lead time, from the time an accident occurs, the complaint is lodged and the time the settlement is done. By saving that amount, can the honourable Minister confirm and assure this House that with ACCF with the no fault

policy, sometime payment used to be done within weeks? Is that still going to remain or will the people wait for a number of years before compensation is done? One of the best things about ACCF was on time and within weeks people were compensated, which was not achieved by Workmen Compensation in the Ministry of Employment. Can the honourable Minister inform the House that if a complaint or application is lodged, within weeks or months people will be compensated?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me go back to the history of this compensation to educate the honourable Member. Prior to 2019, it was a fault-based compensation. Fault-based meant that the employer could say, “No, I am not going to pay, the investigation has to take place and after full investigation has taken place, if the worker is at fault, then the employer will refuse to pay.”

The employers could also challenge the decision of the Ministry. That was also happening within government ministries. Some government ministries were refusing to pay. When the no-fault compensation basis came, there was no responsibility taken by anyone or responsibility laid on anyone. There is no insurance paid by the employers against injuries or fatalities at workplace. That is why ACCF could expeditiously complete the exercise of processing and passing on the benefit to the injury-affected worker or people or any fatality.

Comparatively, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last year, we had almost doubled the processing of benefits to those affected. Doubled means we have done twice as many as ACCF was doing. ACCF has given us a backlog of 2,000. They are only files that we are now going through. That is where we are also extending the time period from three years to six years so that people do not miss out.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister had said earlier on in his response that the Ministry is allocated \$7 million to cater for the compensation payout. How much of this amount has been utilised in the payout?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will have that answer for the honourable Member before this parliamentary session is over.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I think this is an opportune time to take our break. We will now suspend proceedings for lunch. The Parliament will resume at 2.30 p.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.30 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.35 p.m.

Retention Incentives for Health Professionals
(Question No. 135/2025)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services inform Parliament on the retention incentives the Ministry has in place for the following specific categories of health professionals, excluding nurses; medical officers, dental officers, medical laboratory scientists, medical imaging technologists/radiologists and pharmacists?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services continues to ensure its commitment in executing one of its key strategic outcomes, which is to attract, select, recruit, retain and empower the right people to create a diverse, inclusive and engaged workforce.

In the last two years, much focus was on the effort to retain and reduce the repatriation of nurses, which occurred in 2021 and 2022. This has been successfully achieved, given the enormous reduction in the number of nurses leaving the Ministry. The Ministry is also trying its best to ensure that other health professionals are given the best working conditions and incentives within the ambience of the law.

There was also measures introduced by the Government earlier for job security purposes, and this includes increasing retirement age, salary increases for the last two financial years, recruitment of retired workers for scarce skill areas, opportunities for training and capacity building locally and abroad, collaboration with partners for overseas short work attachments and seminars. At the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, our medical staff who serve in the rural and maritime areas and occupy staff quarters do not pay rent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, even though there is no specific retention monetary incentive in place for most of the countries, the following existing strategies are implemented for retention and recognition purposes:

- (1) Medical officers – separate salary structure which has the base salary steps, starting from step four to step seven. In addition to their salary, the Medical On-Call allowance called MOC allowances is paid depending on the health facility a medical officer is serving in. Medical officers who are serving in the rural and remote areas are eligible for rural and remote allowance, which is classified into married and single entitlements.
- (2) Medical laboratory scientists are recruited at remuneration of Band F, Step 4 – significant improvement in workforce, retention found given the current field of medical laboratory scientist positions of 96 percent that cushion the current demand of laboratory services in all health facilities.
- (3) Dental officers are paid with on-call allowance wherever the officer is attending on-call duties. The Ministry is facing difficulties in recruiting dental hygiene positions due to lack of interested applicants, as the training institution no longer offers specific diploma programme, but offering degree on oral health and care. This is probably why many choose to take up dental therapists, as it is a higher band rate than a dental hygienist.

The Ministry is still in the process of developing the National Strategic Plan for our Health Workforce 2025-2034 and our technical working group has been having meetings on a monthly basis. This plan is to guide the Ministry with the required need of human resources in all health professionals for the next 10 years, in alignment to the demand of the services and international standards.

As for Medical Imaging Technologist and Pharmacist positions are areas that the Ministry is still facing difficulties in attracting qualified applicants due to no interested applicants as graduates opt to take up better offer from other organisations. Strategies of salary adjustment within the eligible salary range were not approved, but the Ministry will continue to work on other retention strategies that can attract these cadre holders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is also working on re-evaluating allied health professionals such as environmental health, medical imaging technologists and pharmacists where necessary to accommodate additional responsibilities to grow and service demand and emerging need. The Ministry has encouraged that some measures that the Government and Ministry has put in place are working. We are seeing a slowing down of staff attrition rate from the Ministry. We may not be able to match salaries of remunerations in the private sector or abroad, but we can make their working conditions attractive enough for those who have the passion and commitment to stay and serve the Ministry and the nation.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for Health for that comprehensive answer, but unfortunately that does not resolve the issue that we are currently facing. If you look at the Ministry of Health, we do not have director levels or senior managers. Most of the department heads are sitting at principal positions.

The issue is going up the hierarchy. We need to create more positions such as managers and directors who need to be sitting in these Divisional Hospitals. Are there any plans to create director-level position and manager-level position within this cadre so that individuals or these allied health workers can transform themselves from senior technicians to these levels before being promoted to the principal level?

If we see, there is a generational gap; if you look at the principal-level position, there is a person sitting above the age of 50, but the whole workforce is between the age of 20 years and 30 years. In between, everyone has migrated. Is the honourable Minister looking to introduce more positions that can give career pathways to allied health workers?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, nevertheless, yes, I had mentioned that we are currently in the development of the National Strategic Plan for the Health Workforce 2025 to 2034, and that will guide us into some of the recommendations that you have mentioned that we already are working on, that is, realigning some of the positions to say the director level, as you rightly mentioned to allow the kind of incentives for staff to stay on board to ensure that they have a pathway to go to right up to Permanent Secretary level.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this question was apparently sent to me to ask the honourable Minister for Health. You have spoken about recruitment and pay, this question is in regard to Medical Laboratory Scientists in our workforce that have not received overtime and while they are at the salary band of other people, like in the pharmacy and radiology department, the medical laboratory scientists are not getting their overtime. They are being told things like there are no funds or budget is less, et cetera, which does not sound good or reflect good on the government. Can the honourable Minister provide clarity on this?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, overtimes are being paid and if they are not being paid, that can be brought to my attention.

FRCS Compliance Strategy on Revenue Collection
(Question No. 136/2025)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics update Parliament on the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service Compliance Strategy on the revenue collection in the last financial year?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, to begin with, let me highlight some high level aggregate figures on revenue and fiscal outturn for the last financial year, 2024-2025. For the last fiscal year ending July 2025, Government collected \$4.04 billion in total revenues, tax and non-tax revenues. This is the first time we have crossed the \$4 billion mark in total revenue collections or setting a new fiscal milestone for Fiji. Similarly, tax collections stood at around \$3.5 billion, the highest collection ever and \$185 million above the budgeted forecast for the last financial year, 2024-2025.

Subsequently given the above budget revenue collection slightly lower expenditures, the Government actually registered a 2.4 percent of GDP, \$338 million, almost half of the budgeted deficit of 4.5 percent of GDP that we had forecasted in the budget. This is the lowest fiscal deficit since 2016-2017 financial year. As such, public debt stood at around \$10.8 billion at the end of July 2025, equivalent to 77.1 percent of GDP and this is a major reduction from the ratio of over 90 percent that we inherited when we came into government, and also lower than 79 percent of GDP at the end of July 2024. Public debt has been on a consistent downward path when you look at debt-to-GDP ratio.

Let me just also highlight, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reasons for the strong revenue performance. This has been underpinned by three key factors:

- (1) We had a strong rebound in economic growth, business activity and consumption spending which continues.
- (2) The Government undertook some significant reforms and my friends on the Opposition side just talked about the changes we made to VAT (zero, nine and 15), they forget about the income tax we raised from 20 percent to 25 percent and other revenue measures that we put in place.
- (3) A strong compliance strategy implemented by FRCS.

Some of the compliance strategies - VAT monitoring system rolled out across multiple industries, enhanced the risk profiling of taxpayers and data analytics, expanded education and MSME outreach to remote areas to encourage compliance, and establishment of the targeting centre and post-assessment verification team.

The new Compliance Strategy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, 2025 to 2028, is doing three things. It is creating a simplified taxpayer services, sector specific interventions, digital tools and educational platforms and, therefore, Government is committed to fostering a culture of voluntary tax compliance across all sectors of the economy. Our aim is to make it easier for individuals and businesses to understand and meet their tax obligations without the need for enforcement.

Through this tax compliance strategy, FRCS also provides tailored support, education, accessible services and empowering taxpayers to register, file and pay taxes accurately. Whether you are a small business owner or a large enterprise, FRCS provides this support. So, there is a strategy to strengthen voluntary compliance and enhance risk management, which means we are analysing more data to identify and mitigate tax compliance risks effectively, promote transparency and trust to foster public confidence through clear communication and fair enforcement, and leverage technology to implement digital tools to streamline processes and improve taxpayer experience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just wanted to highlight what has resulted as part of the compliance strategy and the effort. To date, a total of 1,511 cases have been closed across various initiatives, resulting in a confirmed tax liability of approximately \$40.9 million. Notably, the VAT Non-Lodgement Project and voluntary compliance by taxpayers themselves contributed significantly to \$35.5 million in VAT assessments from 1,179 cases.

Other impactful projects, such as VAT NIL-LOJA and VAT Quick Win, collectively added about \$4 million. Sector-specific incentives, including wholesale, retail, homestays and other service activities, have also contributed to about more than half a million dollars in assessments. Compliance checks on brand new vehicle owners and social media cases are underway, while the whistle-blower programme and Fiji Financial Intelligence Unit (FFIU) referrals have generated about another half a million dollars tax liabilities.

These efforts are just examples, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that has led to a multi-pronged approach to identifying and addressing non-compliance across both, individual and business taxpayers. The other areas - MSME - we are making effort, we are promoting voluntary compliance, and that is also working. So, despite the recent reduction in VAT rates, FRCS remains on track to maintain similar levels of revenue collection this year, and this is partly due to strong economic growth and strong confidence by the consumers. The spending does not show any sign of declining. All the latest figures are very clear.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is also a reflection of the economic growth, the investments that we are experiencing in the economy. I want to take this opportunity to thank the FRCS Board, the CEO, and all the staff for the hard work in making sure that we have a compliance strategy and a revenue collection strategy that helps the Government.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, quite a series of questions to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, and I have two questions. The first is, when VAT or other taxes change, has there ever been a consultation or analysis done with businesses on the time, cost and effort it takes for businesses to change prices and everything? Some of the supermarkets have thousands of products and they say, “Oh, it is an overnight task, pay the staff”, and on and on.

My second question is, I have been going around and talking to small businesses. I guess the Vat Monitoring System (VMS) is compulsory for businesses over \$50,000 threshold or something, so is it still active, or is it still on hold, or who bears the cost of VMS, because businesses are saying that it is quite expensive to set it up?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The question is a bit convoluted but, nonetheless, Mr. Speaker, let me explain. For the VAT reduction, the budget is announced a month before its actual effectiveness. At this time around, there was even more time for people to digest and understand.

We did a lot of consultations, and a lot of businesses now have their records online, computerised and digitised. I do not see any serious difficulty and I think most businesses have been able to pass on prices as a result of the reduction in VAT and as a result of the reduction in

duties. Some, of course, play games, and that is why we have this taskforce. I think the taskforce has done a good job, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of its presence and in terms of advocating to the businesses that the intention of these policies by the government is that businesses will eventually pass on these to the consumers and not pocket the additional revenue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is part of our strategy. Sometimes, the intended outcome of the policies are not 100 percent and that is normal. But I think this time around, because of the advocacy we did and the discussions in the well-planned and post-budget consultations, the work of the taskforce have helped businesses to pass on the prices to the consumers.

Shortage of Secondary School Teachers
(Question No. 137/2025)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Education inform Parliament on the specific subjects where there is a shortage of teachers in secondary schools?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for raising the question. The question probably is poorly informed. As a former Head of Human Resource of the Ministry of Education, this information would be as one would expect.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have already informed this august House in March, areas in terms of the teachers in Ministry of Education are STEM subject teachers, areas of science, chemistry, biology, physics, computer science, industrial arts, and maths. Those are referred to as STEM subjects and also PMAC - physical education, music, art and craft. If you clarify in terms of your question, the specific shortage of teachers is because most of them are migrating because they have better opportunities abroad and some have also found better opportunities locally.

In terms of how we are addressing the teacher movements that have created these shortages, we are also liaising with teacher-training institutions and scholarships, Director Curriculum and Learning Services (DCLS), in terms of teacher training recruitment. We are also reviewing the recruitment and deployment policies and strategies for the Ministry of Education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are recruiting final year students as of January 2024. These specific areas, including primary school teachers from teacher-training institutions to fulfil the requirements first at Fiji Teachers Registration Authority (FTRA) with a registration fee of \$25 for limited authority to teach certificate valid for one year. In the process, we would also work with the teachers to complete their programme of studies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of the People's Coalition Government initiative, the Ministry of Education also implemented policies for teacher retention. These include:

- (1) Increasing the retirement age from 60 years to 62 years for STEM subjects.
- (2) Special and inclusive education as part of the scarce list in the Ministry of Civil Service.
- (3) Consulting with the Public Service Commission to review this listing to include our primary school teachers as well.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister has rightly pointed out that the shortage is mainly due to a large number of teachers giving in their resignation. Teachers are resigning for better opportunities, where the salary is quite attractive. Are there any plans to provide

more scholarships in subject areas where there is a shortage of teachers, especially in secondary schools?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- I have always alluded that teacher shortages is a national and global issue, it is not only limited to Fiji. If you look at the UNESCO Global Report on teachers which was released on 26th February 2024, that will give you an indication of issues confronting teacher retention and teacher shortages. As I have alluded, we are also discussing with the TSLS in terms of availability of scholarships and with the bilateral partners for specific subjects and areas of need within the Ministry, like the STEM subjects.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question to the honourable Minister on temporary appointment of retirees to fill the gaps. Is that something that the Ministry considers and approves, because in some areas, while you are trying to fill the vacant posts, there are retirees in the same area who are also qualified to do the work, so is that available?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have alluded to, we are working with the Public Service Commission in the scarce skills that they have. We are trying to also include, in discussions with them, the primary school teachers to be part of the scarce skills, according to the Public Service Commission.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question is related to understanding the reasons as to why teachers are leaving. Of course, it is greener pastures, but there are other internal issues that need to be addressed, for example, the salary and location allowances which are not paid - I am told by teachers for term two. These are all causing frustration for teachers as well. Are you considering the current students who are studying at universities and, perhaps, those in the final year, for them to join the workforce to address this teacher shortage?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- I think I have already mentioned that we are looking at students as of January 2024. We are taking that option as well.

Launch of Housing Authority's Key Initiatives
(Question No. 138/2025)

HON A. BIA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government inform Parliament of the recent launching of the three key initiatives by Housing Authority, their objectives, target beneficiaries, and its impact on housing accessibility and affordability across Fiji?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, rural to urban migration has significantly contributed to rising demand for housing across Fiji. As families move from urban centres in search of better employment, education and healthcare opportunities, the pressure on housing infrastructure continues to grow.

To address this challenge and cushion the impact of increasing demand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Housing Authority has recently launched three key initiatives aimed at enhancing housing accessibility and affordability for Fijians nationwide. These initiatives are the:

- (1) Model Homes Programme;
- (2) newly reduced home loan interest rates; and

(3) re-introduction of the Village Housing Loan Scheme.

For Model Home Initiative, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are two types of conventional homes that will be constructed under this initiative. There are two types of conventional homes - one will be using pre-cast panel walls and the other will use light steel frame walls with panels. These designs are durable, termite proof, cost-efficient and sustainable. By standardising layouts and streamlining building processes, Housing Authority can deliver homes more quickly at a lower cost, without compromising quality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure the timely delivery of these homes, the Housing Authority has engaged multiple contractors across Housing Authority's key subdivisions, like the one in Tavakubu in Lautoka, Tacirua, Nepani and Davuilevu in the Central Division. I am pleased to announce that by the end of December 2025, Housing Authority is planning to deliver a total of 235 model homes - a major milestone in our mission to provide safe and affordable housing for our people.

On newly reduced home interest rates, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Housing Authority already offers the lowest lending interest rates in Fiji. Through this new initiative, rates have been further reduced to specifically support first-time homeowners with a combined household income of up to \$50,000. This bold step is designed to make mortgage financing more affordable and accessible for families who have long aspired to own a home but faced financial difficulties.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the revised interest rates are structured into two categories, as follows:

- (1) Those families earning below \$30,000 annually will benefit from a reduced interest rate of 2 percent for the first five years, followed by a variable rate of 4 percent per annum thereafter, or from the six years onwards.
- (2) Those families who are earning between \$30,000 and \$50,000 will receive an interest rate of 3.5 percent for the first five years, with a variable rate of 6 percent per annum from year six.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to acknowledge with appreciation the concessional interest rate of 0.25 percent per annum offered through the Reserve Bank of Fiji's Housing Facility. This support enables Housing Authority to extend lending options to eligible customers with a combined household income of up to \$50,000, thereby, strengthening our efforts to make home ownership more accessible for low and middle-income Fijians.

On the reintroduction of the Village Housing Loan Scheme, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this has been reintroduced to provide affordable, durable and culturally appropriate housing solutions to rural communities while preserving traditional Fijian lifestyles.

One of the major barriers to home ownership in rural areas is the lack of accessible financing. Traditional banks often impose stringent lending criteria, making it impossible for families in our villages to secure home loans. However, the re-introduction of this Scheme has enabled families and villages in rural and maritime areas access finance for housing projects such as construction of new homes, renovation of existing homes and construction and upgrade of community halls and evacuation centres, as well as churches.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, close to 125 villages across Fiji have successfully repaid their village loans under this Scheme, demonstrating its effectiveness and sustainability. The programme has played a vital role in enabling rural communities to access climate-resilient housing, while also helping to reduce urban migration pressures by improving livelihoods and living standards within our village settings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these three initiatives reflect the Coalition Government's unwavering commitment to ensuring that every Fijian, regardless of income level or geographical location, has access to safe, secure and affordable housing by addressing financial barriers, promoting climate-resilient construction and supporting rural environments, paving a path towards a more sustainable and secure future for our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the Housing Authority Board, Executive Management, and staff for their continued efforts in transforming the housing landscape across Fiji.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.-Honourable Minister, you talked about the two different designs of model homes and you also talked about cost effectiveness. What would be roughly the cost of each of those two different designs that you have mentioned?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the construction of a two-bedroom modern home, the average per metre for a model home in Nepani is 70 square metres per house per lot and Davuilevu it is around 68 square metres. The pricing, inclusive of land, is around \$140,000 to \$180,000 per lot, which is inclusive of house as well as the land.

The issue in the country is the affordability of constructing new homes and the most affordable construction cost varies anywhere between \$1,500 to \$1,750 per square metre. That is something that Housing Authority is targeting and through the construction of these small homes, the Housing Authority is meeting that aspect of the provision of affordable housing in our country.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other initiative is on the reduced interest rate. We have talked about the first five years - fixed rate, and then the variable rates kick in on the sixth year. Do they have options after the fifth year to seek assistance from other lending agencies that might offer better options for all the tenants?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the new housing financial package that has been launched by the Housing Authority was brought about with the assistance of the Reserve Bank of Fiji which gives Housing Authority a very minimal rate of 0.25 percent and there are some conditions attached with it. They are given a separate package in the first five years for that and on the sixth year, if they want to migrate to another bank or get their loans re-mortgaged by another bank, they are given that option.

One of the good thing about Housing Authority is the one stop shop concept where it is not only about provision of mortgage financing, they also provide other products, like mortgage house insurance protection. In launching one of these products that I officiated in June this year Recently, there were two debtors who were assisted through this housing mortgage insurance package. Those are some things that apart from the normal housing, they also provide mortgage housing protection to customers.

Update on Waste to Climate Action Programme
(Question No. 140/2025)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Education update Parliament on the Waste to Climate Action - Scaling Sustainable Composting in Fijian Schools initiative?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 18th September, 2025, the Pacific Recycling Foundation launched its pilot School Composting Programme at the Nadi Sangam Primary

School. The project is funded by the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives and Recycle Organics. We provided the technical support for the project.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Pacific Recycling Foundation (PRF) is the implementation lead for a period of six months. The School Composting Programme is a key milestone in the comprehensive school-based initiative, the Recycling on the Go (ROG) Ambassadors Programme.

The project details, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the School Composting Programme is scheduled for implementation across nine schools in Nadi and one school in Lautoka, which will impact approximately 7,000 students. The initiative was initially piloted at Nadi Sangam Primary School, they also participated in the Recycling on the Go Programme.

This dual involvement provided a valuable opportunity to test and refine a composting model tailored for the operational needs of both, staff and students. A one-month interval has been designated between the pilot launch and the broader rollout. This period allows for a thorough assessment of the pilot school's effectiveness and the identification of any necessary adjustments to scaling of the programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the schools that have been selected to participate in this composting programme are:

- (1) Nadi Sangam Primary School;
- (2) Sangam Sadhu Swami Memorial College;
- (3) Swami Vivekananda College;
- (4) Nadi Muslim College;
- (5) Nadi Muslim Primary;
- (6) Nadi Arya Primary School;
- (7) Namaka Public School;
- (8) Korovuto College;
- (9) Korovuto Primary School; and
- (10) Jasper Williams High School.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the materials have been provided to the schools. They include a composting infrastructure, a large compartment, a small compartment, petrol bins and skids. The PRF staff will provide training on the impacts and procedures involved in composting in schools, and the assigned teachers will also be provided with a comprehensive manual for reference.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the following is outlook for February 2026:

- report from the teacher in charge in each school regarding any challenges faced during the period of five to six months;
- schools are ready to take on full responsibility of the programme, including self-assessment, and improvement in manure acquired from the compost is utilised in school gardens; and
- final report by PRF is submitted to relevant partners.

This initiative, scaling sustainable composting will be embedded in for both primary and secondary curriculum. This will be further added to the current strands and sub-strands in Agriculture, Basic Science, Geography and School Gardening Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the waste to climate action scaling, sustainable composting and Fijian school initiative emphasises that we all should view waste as an opportunity rather than a problem, transforming it into soil enrichment, climate solutions and sustainable practices as this project goes

beyond compost bins by shaping mindset, teaching students the value of organic waste and promoting harmony with nature through recycling, gardening and reducing emissions.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, are there any plans to expand this to other primary schools, especially special primary schools? You have mentioned nine schools, and it is secondary schools, primary schools, and I think the special schools are not mentioned.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, yes, there are plans to include other schools as well, just like the recycling on the go. That will be determined after five or six months of the pilot programme.

Written Question

iTaukei Resource Owners Support and Development Fund (Question No. 141/2025)

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

Can the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts inform Parliament of the expected beneficiaries of the iTaukei Resource Owners Support and Development Fund for the 2025–2026 financial year with respect to the following:

- (a) the estimated number of landowning groups (such as *mataqali* or *yavusa*) set to benefit, along with their provincial distribution;
- (b) the criteria and scoring system that will guide eligibility and selection; and
- (c) any pilot projects or case studies conducted or underway, including key successes and challenges encountered?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as per Standing Order, I now submit my written response.

CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT – MINISTRY OF LANDS AND MINERAL RESOURCES 2021-2023 ANNUAL REPORTS

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

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Report of the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources Annual Reports for 2021-2022 and 2022-2023, which were tabled on 18th July, 2025.

HON. T.R. MATASAWALEVU.- I second, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; I stand before this august House today as the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources to engage in this important debate on the Consolidated Review Report of the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources Annual Report for 2021-2022 and 2022-2023, which I had the honour to table on 18th July, 2025.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Report presents the outcome of rigorous oversight by the Committee, reflecting our commitment to ensuring that the Ministry responsible for our land and

mineral resources operates with transparency, accountability and efficiency.

I want to emphasise the following points for consideration by this House:

(1) Importance of the Sector

Our land and mineral resources are strategic assets that underpin national development, economic growth and social stability. Effective management and regulation in this sector are non-negotiable for sustainable development.

(2) Positive Progress

The Ministry has made commendable progress in several areas, including:

- (i) improved land registration systems that enhance tenure security for citizens;
- (ii) increased efforts to monitor mining operations and environmental compliance.
- (iii) initiatives aimed at modernising the sector through policy reforms and capacity building.

(3) Challenges Identified

Despite these advances, the Report underscores several significant challenges that must be addressed:

- (i) Delays and inefficiencies in land claim processing and title issuance;
- (ii) Persistent illegal mining activities that undermine legal frameworks and environmental conservation.
- (iv) Limited use of technology in data management which affects transparency and informed decision-making.

(4) Committee's Recommendations

To strengthen the Ministry's performance, the Committee calls on the Government and relevant stakeholders to:

- (i) Allocate sufficient resources for capacity enhancement and infrastructure development within the Ministry.
- (ii) Enforce regulatory frameworks with greater vigour to curb illegal mining and land disputes; and
- (iii) Invest in modern information systems for effective resource tracking and public access to information.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and honourable Members, the responsibility of safeguarding our natural resources lies with all of us. This Committee's Report is not just an assessment, it is a call for action to ensure that our land and mineral wealth are managed responsibly for the benefit of our current and future generations.

I urge honourable Members to engage constructively in this debate, share insights and collectively support measures that will enhance governance and sustainability in this vital sector.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. I have a list of speakers with me, and at the end of the debate, we will have the right of reply from the mover.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the Consolidated Review Report of the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources' 2021-2023 Annual Reports. This is a critical document, and as an Opposition Member, my role is to offer necessary constructive scrutiny so that the Executive Government can perform better for everyone in Fiji.

Our land and mineral resources are the backbone of our economy and the heritage of everyone in Fiji. We must ensure that these resources are managed with the utmost care, efficiency and fairness for every citizen.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the first serious challenge highlighted in this Report is one of institutional capacity. The Ministry is facing a crisis of talent. The Report clearly indicates high staff turnover, especially among the highly skilled technical officers. We are seeing a slow but steady loss of expertise.

The Report tells us that these skilled people are leaving for greener pastures elsewhere because of inadequate salary bands. This is simply not acceptable. How can we expect to efficiently survey, value and manage the nation's most valuable asset when the people entrusted with that job are not retained?

My first hard question to the honourable Minister is, what immediate tangible action – outside of merely recommending, has the Ministry taken to increase the salary bands and provide the necessary technical facility to retain our essential surveyors and valuers as identified in the report? We need results, not just requests to the Ministry of Civil Service.

Secondly, the most urgent point of serious concern is the current management of State land leases and the new rental reassessments. We acknowledge the honourable Minister's statement that some tenants were paying peanuts, as low as \$3, because the reassessment cycles was missed out some time. Correcting this is necessary to ensure fair returns to the State. However, we have heard disturbing reports from business owners across Fiji. These are lessee who have paid their rent on time, invested significant money into their commercial properties and crucially provide employment for our people. They are now being met with a sudden and devastating increase in their lease payments, sometimes up to 700 percent. This is not fairness; this is penalty on diligence and investment.

The honourable Minister spoke about balancing fairness and legal obligation, but hitting hard working, compliant business owners with 700 percent jump is economic cruelty. The worst thing is when these owners inquire about the massive increase, they are allegedly met with hostility from Ministry staff and told, “If you do not take it, there are plenty of other people who will be happy to get this land.” This hostile, “take it or leave it” attitude directly contradicts the spirit of a government that should be supporting local enterprises and investments. We cannot allow the correction of past errors become the destruction of current businesses.

My second hard question is, given the honourable Minister's commitment to fair rental, how can the Ministry justify a sudden, penalising 700 percent increase on compliant business lessees? What specific disciplinary action will be taken against staff who use hostile language, threatening tenants with evacuation if they question the hike?

Finally, let me turn to modernisation and governance. The weakness in data management system continues to impede timely decisions. If a citizen, particularly a leaseholder cannot get accurate information quickly, or if the Ministry cannot accurately track resources is because of antiquated systems, this adds friction to the entire economy. We must invest heavily in modern technology and training to fix this.

Despite these profound challenges, the Opposition is fair. We are not blind to success. We must commend the Ministry for the hard work done in the mineral sector. The successful cessation of bauxite mining at Nawailevu, Bua and the subsequent successful rehabilitation effort, is a

regulatory success story. The replanted pine trees are projected to earn the landowners – who are primarily *iTaukei* approximately \$4 million. This demonstrates that when the Ministry exerts its will and follow through with the Environmental Impact Assessment conditions, the results protect both the environment and economic interests of these people. This is the positive standard we must apply to every project.

We also acknowledge the Ministry's financial performance, having achieved an unqualified audit report. This demonstrates sound internal financial control, which is a commendable achievement. The Ministry also successfully completed a number of borehole projects in Savusavu Lailai Settlement, commissioned in 2022, and provided reliable clean drinking water. It was part of a large groundwater reticulation programme which has benefited more than 6,000 people.

The way forward, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry should continue to improve water access, especially where surface sources are inadequate or during dry season especially in red zones like Momi, Sigatoka Valley, Tavua, Rakiraki, Ra and parts of Tailevu. The Opposition is critical because we believe in the higher potential of this Ministry. The report before us is not a hammer of condemnation, it is a roadmap for urgent renewal.

We welcome the commitment by the Ministry to take on the recommendations of the Standing Committee. We support the motion today for Parliament to take note of this Report, but our support is conditional on the Executive Government in demonstrating genuine, fast-paced action on staff retention, fairness in lease reassessment and professional conduct. The people of Fiji deserve a Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources that is highly skilled, technologically modern, and rigorously effective.

MR. SPEAKER.- I apologise to the honourable Members. Each of our speakers has seven minutes to deliver his or her contribution, as you will notice from the clock on the board.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to first thank the Standing Committee on Natural Resources on the review of the Ministry's Annual Report 2021 to 2023 combined. The Standing Committee on Natural Resources have made nine recommendations contained in the Report, and I want to briefly speak to all of them.

Recommendation No. 1

We would like to say that the Ministry, through our lease inspectors, are working closely with the Natural Resource Monitoring Officers to ensure that strict compliance is made in relation to leases and licence conditions. In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, discussions are also underway regarding the introduction of flexible working hours for our lease inspectors, which would allow them to also be able to visit and inspect leases during the weekend or times outside of the official working hours.

Recommendation No. 2

The monitoring mechanism will be adopted has been suggested in the Report, to further enhance our drive to support sustainable development. I also wish to make mention that the current reviews of our statutes and the regulation also aims to incorporate sustainable management of land and mineral resources, including groundwater.

Recommendation No. 3

Recommend that the Ministry improve its data management system by investing in modern technology and training staff to ensure timely, accurate information for effective is given for effective decision making and monitoring. The Ministry has incorporated into its work plan the migration of the current lease system that we have or the database that we have from the legacy Oracle platform

to an SQL platform as part of the effort to enhance our data security and improve system performance.

Additionally, the Ministry has invested in procuring new IT equipment to replace outdated hardware and capitalize on various IT and GIS training opportunities that are available for our staff, both locally and internationally, to upskill them in data collection, data management and data analysis in order to better support informed decision making.

Recommendation No. 4

The Ministry is actively practicing this approach to enhance collaboration through technical committee meetings and joint site visits which intends to continue these efforts moving forward. The collaboration will be further strengthened not only amongst government ministries and agencies but also with Non-Government Organisations and where such practices are already underway, we continue to support them.

Recommendation No. 5

This is already incorporated into our Annual Business Plan and regularly monitored and reviewed during our senior management meetings.

Recommendation No. 6

Mr. Speaker, this comment has been duly noted and is a topic that has been consistently addressed at our management level.

Recommendation No. 7

The Committee recommends that future annual reports would include a little bit more detail of the land bank and as such, total land area, current use, ownership and plans for development or redistribution.

Mr. Speaker, in relation to the year 2022-2023, *iTaukei* land that are under the land bank totalled just over 10,000 hectares. State land inside of the land bank is just over 385 hectares and the buyback land which is under the Buy Back Scheme is just over 667 hectares.

There was no designation recorded between 2022 to 2023 but nevertheless we continue to support the NDP goals with registration of six leases during that year.

Recommendation No. 8

The Committee recommends that the Ministry maintains its strong financial management practices, address any audit finding and strengthen internal controls to ensure continued transparency and accountability.

Mr. Speaker, this recommendation is noted, I also note the honourable Nath's comment and contribution to this Report. The Ministry will continue to work with the Ministry of Finance to ensure that our finance management practices and policies are at its tip-top shape.

Recommendation No. 9

The Committee recommends that the Ministry develop a staff retention strategy focusing on engagement professional development, career progression and competitive compensation to reduce high turnover.

The Ministry has implemented these following strategies in its plan to retain the skilled workers in the Ministry. There has been a review of the Ministry's study leave with pay practices to allow staff to proceed to study leave with full pay. Reactivation of full acting allowance to scarce

skills who meet only a portion of the MQR, regularisation of position for staff who have been acting or relieving on the position for more than six months as per the Civil Service Circular that was adopted in 2024.

There has, of course, been salary increases of staff who previously had no salary increase. Increased exposure for staff also to attend overseas meetings, conventions, training, for example, travelling to COP meeting, leadership meeting, study tours in New Zealand, Japan and South Korea. We are doing the best we can amidst the challenges of greener pastures, better conditions and better pay not only overseas but also with the private sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, I once again commend or thank the Chairperson and the Members of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources for the recommendations and we will continue to take these recommendations on board to deliver better services at the Ministry.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, I thank you for allowing me to contribute to this very important debate to the Consolidated Review Report of the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources (*Parliamentary Paper No. 13/2025*). I want to personally thank the Standing Committee on Natural Resources for their hard work. This Report does exactly what the parliamentary oversight is meant to do. It holds the Ministry accountable and ensures it serves the common Fijian with fairness and transparency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset, we appreciate the good news. We see the unqualified audit report before us. We acknowledge that the Ministry exceeded its land registration target – that is a success for efficiency. However, we cannot let the good audit numbers outshine a real pain felt by the people we represent. The Ministry must always remember its core duty, that is, to manage our valuable resources for the benefit of every single Fijian, not just for corporate interest or bureaucratic convenience.

I want to focus my intervention on a critical issue that I hear about constantly from the communities, an issue of fundamental administrative fairness. The burden of unfair rent increases. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Report highlights the need for better lease enforcement, but there is a flip side to that coin that must be addressed. The unjust, sudden, and unfair increases in lease rentals without proper consultation being done with the lessees. Time and again, our citizens, small business owners, farmers, and even homeowners of State land are hit with massive retrospective rental adjustments. They receive a letter in the mail, often with little to no explanation, and they are told that their rent has tripled or quadrupled overnight.

Where is fairness in this process? How can a Ministry demand rental from a farmer struggling with global commodity prices without sitting down and consulting with that farmer? How can a retired couple on a fixed income absorb a sudden spike in their rental residential lease increase? This is not governance, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This is an administrative hammer blow to the common man and woman. While the Ministry has a right to review the leases, they have a moral obligation to ensure the process is transparent, consultative and affordable. We must find a way to stabilise these rights and create a transparent, consultative mechanism that disciplines the ability of our people to pay.

The injustice of idle land, my second point aligns with finding number one of the report on the need for better enforcement of state land lease conditions to end poor utilisation. This is moral injustice. We have precious State land tied up in leases, often for commercial or industrial purposes, which are left sitting idle, unproductive and empty for years.

Meanwhile, a young Fijian entrepreneur is struggling to find a plot to start a new business. Hardworking farmers are pleading for a piece of land to grow food to feed their families. The idle land is a disgrace. It represents a loss of potential jobs, a loss of economic activity, and a loss of opportunity for the people who truly need it. We must make Recommendations 1 a reality, Mr. Speaker, Sir. If a lessee is not using the land for its intended purpose, if are breaching their lease conditions, the Ministry must have the courage and the political will to enact the ultimate solution - re-entry and cancellation. Take the land back and give it to a responsible Fijian who is ready to put it to productive use for our nation.

Connecting the dots for our communities. Mr. Speaker, Sir, finally I would like to emphasise the findings on public awareness, that is, finding number two. The Ministry does good work. They drill boreholes to clean water in rural villages, in line with SDG 6. They help communities manage their resources, but if the people do not know that this programme exists, how can they access them? This is a failure of communication.

We must implement Recommendation 2 where the Ministry needs to start talking to the people. They must go out, hold public awareness campaigns and publish detailed reports that clearly explain what the Ministry is doing in your village, farming community and in your family. For example, when the Hydrogeology Division drills a borehole, the report mentions that they now collect gender disaggregated data, which is very good. It confirms that when we provide water, we are specifically helping women and girls to bear the burden of water collection. This is the kind of social justice impact we need to celebrate and expand upon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources must transform itself to champion fairness, community development and transparent administration. I urge this House to adopt all these recommendations in the report. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for allowing me time, and I fully support this motion before the House.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Members who have spoken before me. I know the honourable Minister has carefully dealt with all the nine recommendations in the Report, and other Members have also touched. I know this Report is an old one, but I will quickly just give some information and update on the budgetary allocation for the Ministry. Between 2022 and 2026, the Ministry has had a total of \$156 million in budgetary allocation. But the key initiatives in the 2025-2026, I know some honourable Members alluded to the outdated legislation.

There is a new allocation of \$58,000 that is dedicated to the review of the State Lands Act 1945 and the Land Use Act 2010. The Freehold Land Buyback Scheme, \$5 million has been allocated for it. On this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me make this clear, and the honourable Minister did that as well. When I go around the country, there are people who are still asking me if their freehold land is safe or will be taken away. This is partly because of the irresponsible and fearmongering especially of a political party outside this Parliament and some of the members who have gone around the country. In fact, one of the members of that political party that is not present here in Parliament gave a long interview in a radio station in New Zealand. It is good that they are not here, Mr. Speaker, Sir. That is just plain fearmongering.

The Freehold Land Buyback Scheme was always there, and the Minister explained that under all governments, including under the Bainimarama Government, it is a case of a willing seller and willing buyer, nothing more than that, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The \$5 million allocated in the budget is for that.

The survey of mahogany plantations, almost \$840,000 has been allocated for that. A total of four plantations - Galoa, Naboutini, Nukurua and Sawakasa – have been surveyed, with 55 lots already been completed. In this financial year, the surveying of Sawakasa and Nukurua plantations is forecasted to finish, and the team will start surveying Nausori plantations. Again, this allocation is designed to do that.

On the ongoing digitisation of land data and records, the Ministry of Lands is working on it with a budgetary allocation of \$0.5 million. The upgrading and enhancement of Geodetic Datum, the Global Geodetic Reference Frame which is a necessary tool to help address the growing demand for land mapping accuracy. Again, \$184,000 has been allocated for it.

Groundwater assessment and development - this is the Coalition Government's new initiative, embarking on a national borehole project. A sum of \$6.4 million - \$844, 000 for small islands and \$5.6 million for large islands, has been budgeted for in this financial year, which is equivalent to about a 59 percent increase from the 2023-2024 Budget. Two companies have been contracted by the Ministry to assist in the drilling of boreholes. This is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, part of our effort as a government to ensure that our communities in rural areas, where there are no tap water system yet, that they have access to clean drinking water.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Microwave, nothing new.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- There is a hogwash.

(Laughter)

We always get entertained by “hogwash” in this Parliament.

Work is in progress, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Groundwater Resource Development Management Policy was launched in 2023 - a first-ever policy to address critical issues such as over extraction, contamination and equitable access.

With the allocation in the 2025-2026 National Budget and the previous two allocations before it, there have been issues about lease areas. Again, the Ministry of Lands has done a good job in collecting those but in terms of lease assessment, yes, there are issues where tenants may not be happy. But lease assessment is part of the lease agreement for any kind of lease, whether it is an *iTaukei* land lease, or whether it is a State lease, it is part of the lease agreement.

The reassessment is stated very carefully that it will be done every five years. I think there are appeals mechanisms as well in terms of what the assessment is. Those who are affected always have the option of appealing to that and making sure that the assessment is not unduly excessive in view of the usage that the land is put to.

On the financial processes, again, the Ministry of Finance has made amendments in the financial instruction processes. This is designed to help the ministries to ensure that they have quick and efficient way of managing the budget and ensuring that there is accountability and transparency in terms of audit, et cetera. I think the Ministry of Lands, as we heard, had an unqualified audit report. That shows that the Ministry's financial management processes are good and in order.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to acknowledge and thank the honourable Members who actively participated in today's debate on land and minerals. Your insightful contribution, well-conceited debate and respectful manner in which this House engaged, highlights

the constructive collaboration spirit that underpins our work. Your contributions will be duly noted and given careful consideration. With that, I have no further comments, and I support the motion before the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT – MINISTRY OF RURAL AND MARITIME DEVELOPMENT AND DISASTER MANAGEMENT 2018–2020 ANNUAL REPORTS

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

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Reports on the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 Annual Reports, which was tabled on 18th July, 2025.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee noted that the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management looking forward for the ways to manage, coordinate and implement Government development efforts in rural and maritime communities and to support socio-economic development, improving living standards, quality of life and empower rural communities to achieve sustainable development livelihood.

The Committee, in its deliberation highlighted seven key findings:

- (1) Despite the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management successfully completed 181 self-help project and 81 Community Access Roads, Footpaths and Footbridges (CARFF) projects.
- (2) A valid concern was raised by the local community regarding the poor Government service delivery anticipated further on the relocation of Commissioner Eastern's Office from Levuka to Suva.
- (3) The formulation of the Ministry's 10-year strategic development plan will be realigned with the National Development Plan.
- (4) The Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management had conducted roadshow programmes to inform the community about Government service in a few remote and rural areas only.
- (5) Routine maintenance was not carried out on rural and new roads after being commissioned,
- (6) The Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management collaborated with the international partners, donor agencies and Non-Government Organisations to complete various rural development projects.
- (7) The new National Disaster Resilience Act requires all stakeholders to have their own Disaster Management Plan or Emergency Operation Plan in consultation with the National Disaster Management Office.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee then came up with seven recommendations. The Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management should:

- (1) Be adequately funded to continue with the Self-Help and CARFF project in areas which have not been covered, considering its importance to the rural and maritime communities.
- (2) Carry out an assessment on the need to relocate the Commissioner Eastern's Office from Suva back to Levuka, based on the concerns raised by the community and key stakeholders.
- (3) Align its strategic development plan with the National Development Plan 2025 to 2029.
- (4) Continue its roadshow programme in all maritime and remote areas on all the government programmes for the benefit of the communities.
- (5) Be fully funded for regular upgrading and maintenance of rural roads which has been commissioned, until such time the responsibility is handed over to Fiji Roads Authority.
- (6) Continue to collaborate with its international partners, donor agencies and non-government organisations to complete its rural development projects, risk and resilience support programmes.
- (7) Monitor and enforce new National Disaster and Residual Act 2019 with the Municipal Council and business community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee noted that the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management's Strategic Priority Areas are aligned with national government priorities and the relevant Sustainable Development Goals.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Social Affairs Committee looks forward to the implementation and commitments on the recommendations put forward by the Committee.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I have a list of speakers with me. Each speaker is allowed seven minutes to deliver their statement. At the end of the debate, we will have the right of reply from the mover.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand today to talk on the Report from the Standing Committee on Social Affairs. This Report looked at the work of the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management during the difficult years of 2018 to 2020.

The Ministry is more than just an office. It is the foundation of our national spirit. The job is to make sure the promise of a better life reaches everyone. This means the villages deep in the highlands and the most distant islands in our ocean home. The work has two huge parts and both are heavy:

- (1) development for the people and places that are often missed; and
- (2) disaster management for a nation that stands right on the frontline of the global climate crisis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the years in review were not easy. In this time, Fiji was hit hard, faced terrible cyclones, huge storms that demanded fast and powerful responses. At the same time, we had to deal with the start of COVID-19 pandemic. This put a massive strain on our national money, our transport and our ability to deliver aid.

The Committee's Report is right to praise the quick action taken by the Ministry and the National Disaster Management Office. When the emergency warnings were out, the teams were there, gave out vital relief, managed help from overseas partners and the Ministry stood by communities as they started the hard work of recovery. I fully accept the Committee's point that the Ministry must fix repeat audit issues. Managing public money is the core of public trust. Managing so much money for different grants, projects and fast emergency relief is hard work, but hard work is not an excuse for having poor accounts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee's call to strengthen the internal checks and fully act on all audit recommendations is now our most important job. We must and should tighten our system to make sure every dollar meant for a rural road, a maritime jetty or disaster aid is tracked correctly, accounted for and used to its maximum potential.

There is a need to improve how we check and judge our community infrastructure programmes. Project delays are frustrating. They happen because building in our outer islands is difficult as they are faced with bad weather, shipping limits and challenging land. However, the Committee is right, we must get better at checking what works and what gives us the best value for money before and after a project. This is the only way to prove that every new water project or community hall truly makes our people safer and stronger.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the most important long-term message from this review is about our national strength and the new laws that support it. The Committee was right to call for the fast launch and the full use of our new disaster laws. The National Disaster Risk Management Act 2024 is much more than a quick change to the rules. It is a full new start for how Fiji prepares for and faces the climate's threat. This Act replaces the old 1998 law. It shifts our focus from simply cleaning up from a storm to a total system of disaster risk management. This new law builds resilience right into the heart of our country.

A major step in the 2024 Act is that it now formally brings everyone into the national plan, especially the private sector. Groups like the Fiji Business Disaster Resilience Council are now key partners, getting ready for a disaster is no longer just the government's problem, it is a whole of nation responsibility. This shows we understand that to fight climate change, we must bring all of Fiji's strength together.

Also, the Committee's call for a full National Policy for Climate Induced Relocation is absolutely critical. Our citizens deserve to live safely and with dignity. We cannot let communities be stuck in limbo while the sea takes their land. This new policy will make the process clear, legally certain and most importantly, it will speed up the safe, proper and respectful moment of our affected communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, finally, every Ministry and every government project must work together towards a single national goal. The work of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management must follow the direction set out in Fiji – the National Development Plan 2025 to 2029 and vision of 2050.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I begin my speech, I would like to mention the passing of the Permanent Secretary of our Ministry, Ratu Isoa Rokowasadromu Talemaibua. Ratu Talemaibua served our nation with quiet strength and uncommon devotion. Every portfolio he touched and, most especially, in our Ministry, embodied the values we aspire to model in public life – integrity, diligence, humility and respect for our people in the most remote maritime communities, to the bustling peri-urban settlements with a steady hand in storms, the patient mentor to young officers, the trusted counsellor to Ministers and colleagues alike.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the work of our Ministry is demanding; calls us to be present where the seas are rough, the roads are long, and the needs are greatest. He stood in those gaps without complaint. He championed practical people-centred development, strengthened coordination between Divisions and Headquarters, and insisted disaster risk reduction be woven into everyday planning rather than treated as an afterthought.

And at this moment, we think of those whom he left behind - his wife, Mrs. Taraivini Senirewa Talemaibua, daughter - Adi Salanieta Talemaibua, son - Ratu Vereniki Talemaibua, and the youngest - Sokoveti Talemaibua. May he rest in peace.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to contribute to the debate on the Annual Reports of the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management for the financial years 2018-2019 and 2019-2020. At the outset, I must note something most telling, the very fact that Parliament is in 2025 only now debating Reports from 2018 to 2020. This delay is just symptomatic of a culture of neglect and disregard for accountability that defined the years of governance which preceded the Coalition Government. Reports that should have informed oversight and timely policy decisions were left on the shelves while our Civil Service operated in an environment that valued control more than transparency.

The Coalition Government, therefore, inherited not an empowered Civil Service but one recovering from a climate of weakened morale and institutional erosion. Ministries like ours which exist to serve the most vulnerable in rural and maritime Fiji, were especially affected. Yet, Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite these conditions, the officers, men, women, and our communities persevered. They delivered under the most trying of circumstances and these Reports must, therefore, be read not only as records of programmes and projects, but also as testimonies of resilience in the face of political overreach, natural disasters, and the global COVID-19 pandemic.

In spite of these constraints, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry did record notable progress during the reporting period. The self-help programme assisted rural Fijians with access to safe drinking water, providing boats and engines and supported income generating ventures. They demonstrated the determination of our communities to lift themselves even when central direction gave them fragmented attention.

The Community Access Roads, Footpaths and Footbridges (CARF) Programme provided safer passage to schools, markets, and health facilities and by connecting remote villages, it also helped to overcome the fragmentation that plagued the government's siloed approach at that time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the challenge of this period cannot be divorced from the political culture of the time. Budgetary restrictions and manpower shortages, particularly at divisional and district levels, reflected a system that show our civil servants as instruments of compliance than as partners in development. Staff morale was weakened, initiative was stifled and service delivery inevitably suffered. Inter-agency coordination remained weak, and the Integrated Rural Development Framework designed to guide equitable rural development, was crippled by entrenched silo mentalities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite these difficulties, the Ministry continued to plant seeds of reform through the UNDP supported Governance for Resilience Development or Gov4Res. The Ministry developed its 10-Year Strategic Development Plan. This is no small feat at that time. The officers nevertheless persisted, embedding risk-informed development into capital programmes, ensuring that disaster resilience and climate adaptation became part of the planning culture.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the most significant achievements of the period was improvement in financial management. For years, opaque reports and political interference defined governance culture, yet within the Ministry, officers worked diligently to restore integrity. They tightened procurement processes, strengthened inspections, and reinforced adherence to financial regulations.

Three unqualified audit opinions from the Office of the Auditor-General in 2019-2021, the first in 15 years, was no minor achievement. This achievement laid the foundation upon which the Coalition Government is now building, expanding accountability, and institutionalising transparency across the board.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these Annual Reports convey two powerful messages - they are records of resilience of civil servants and communities who delivered progress under immense pressure; and they are reminders of the failures of the system under which they were produced. The very delay in debating them underscores how much accountability had been compromised.

Today, the Coalition Government is determined to do better. We are rebuilding trust in government, restoring the confidence of our civil servants, and ensuring that accountability and transparency are the norm, not the exception.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is emerging from the shadows of the past into an area of accountability and empowerment and shared prosperity. In that spirit, I commend to Parliament the Ministry's Annual Reports for the financial years 2018-2019 and 2019-2020. *Vinaka saka vakalevu and dhanyavaad.*

MR. SPEAKER.- Before we continue with the debate, and given the lateness of the hour, I will now entertain a suspension motion. For the purposes of complying with the Standing Orders with respect to sitting times, I now call upon the Leader of the Government in Parliament to move the suspension motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

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

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as already mentioned, we have two items under Schedule 3 - the current motion on the Rural and Maritime Development Annual Reports and the Review Report on the iTaukei Affairs Board 2015-2022 Annual Reports.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 4.18 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.49 p.m.

**RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT –
MINISTRY OF RURAL AND MARITIME DEVELOPMENT AND
DISASTER MANAGEMENT 2018–2020 ANNUAL REPORTS**

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion initiated by the honourable Member on the Consolidated Review Report on the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management's 2018-2020 Annual Reports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I dwell on my speech, I would like to join the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development, on behalf of my family, to extend my heartfelt condolences to Ratu Isoa's family and his friends.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe he was only 47 years old. He is an eye-opener for all of us sitting in this august House. I knew Ratu Isoa Talemaibua very well, knowing him personally - a dedicated public servant and a financial expert. I first met him when he was Head of Budget and Planning. A man originally from Buretu in Tailevu, he left us to think and be careful about our health. It is not the right age to leave the family.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Committee for the detailed review report. I must congratulate them. This report is important because it looks closely to the work of the Ministry during the years 2018-2020. The Ministry has one of the toughest tasks in Government. It serves the people who live far from the towns and cities, in our villages, in the remote highlands and on our beautiful outer islands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are the heart of Fiji. Our job is not simple. We must get things done for them on time. Amongst other responsibilities, the Ministry has two major responsibilities:

- (1) Development — giving access to people through roads, access to water and community projects through Community Access Roads, Footpaths and Footbridges (CARFF); and
- (2) Disaster Management — which is the toughest and protecting our nation from cyclones and climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the years 2018 and 2020 were not normal years. They were years of crisis. We faced strong cyclones that hit our people hard. Then the whole world was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. This meant our national finance was stretching and it was hard to move things around the country.

I want to recognise the excellent work of the National Disaster Management Office, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Director – Ms. Vasiti Soko, the Commissioner Central's Office, Commissioner Western, Commissioner Northern and Commissioner Eastern's Office, although Commissioner Eastern was relocated to Suva. Some of them stayed in office for long hours to serve our people. I thank honourable Usamate, who also joined Commissioner Central's Office during this difficult time because he could not come to Suva to his office, so he was based in Commissioner Central's Office.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the storm hit, they did not wait. They acted fast. They gave out food, water, and shelter. They worked with their donor partners and stood strong with our communities as they started to rebuild. To those honourable Members who questioned their commitment to the people of rural Fiji, I ask you to remember the real work on the ground.

When the ocean started taking homes, we had to move people. The report talks about the Nabavatu community relocation. This was not easy. It was not easy to move those innocent people who had lived on those lands for decades. It involved complex land issues and long processes, but the Ministry did not leave instantly. We provided continuous support. We gave them tents, blankets, and support to 87 families leaving for their new homes. This process is tough because they were emotionally attached to this place, because we are dealing with people whose lives are important. It takes time, but it has to be done carefully, and the Government provided the necessary long-term support. We built on the promise of leaving no one behind and we have proved that during these tough times. I also thank the current honourable Minister for continuing the commitment we made.

Despite all odds, the Ministry successfully completed 118 self-help projects and 86 CARFF projects. Although the current Ministry has not been tested for some time, they should continue to collaborate with international partners, donor agencies and non-government organisations to complete its rural development project and risk and resilience support programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the most important long-term message from this review is about being ready for the future. The Committee rightly called for us to move quickly on our new disaster law. The National Disaster Risk Management Act 2024 is now a law. This is a massive improvement. This new Act is not just about cleaning up after a storm; it is about total disaster risk management. It makes our country stronger from the ground up.

The critical part of the Act is that it now formally brings everyone into the national plan, especially businesses. Getting ready for the disaster is no longer just a Government problem, it is a whole-of-nation responsibility. I urge all to work together so that we can reach the vulnerable people. I thank the Committee for the great work.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to address the recommendations presented in the Standing Committee on Social Affairs Report in the 2018 to 2020 Annual Reports. Before I do so, I would also like to pay tribute to the untimely passing of the Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management. He was a loyal and dedicated civil servant who had contributed immensely to public finance management as the Head of Budget within the Ministry of Finance and later towards Rural and Maritime Development Disaster Management in the last two and a half years as the Permanent Secretary for the Ministry. He will be deeply missed by his colleagues and everyone whom he had a positive impact on. I can say as a serving Member of Parliament and the Minister, the Permanent Secretary was always responsible and available to answer queries, especially from my province of Kadavu. He will be sorely missed.

As mentioned by the honourable Minister, the reports are old. However, I thank the Committee for coming up with recommendations on what could currently be improved. I am very grateful for the sentiments of our honourable Members of the Opposition about the progress that has been made by the Ministry. I believe this is a testament and a legacy the late PS has left behind.

The recommendations that I will cover have already been mentioned by the honourable Minister, about the relocation of the Commissioner's office from Suva back to Levuka. This has been recommended by someone from the province of Kadavu, and having the Commissioner Eastern's Office in Suva is much more convenient for Kadavu and Lau to be able to access the Commissioner Eastern's Office rather than going back to Levuka. As you know the Ministry has allocated Provincial Administrators stationed in Levuka to oversee their interests and then you have District Officers in Gau as well as Koro and the smaller islands like Moturiki and Makogai remain close to Levuka and can access services in the old capital.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the re-alignment of the Ministry's Strategic Plan to the National Development Plan, there was a 10-year Strategic Plan from 2021 to 2031. However, the Ministry is now engaging a consultant to review this framework so that it aligns with the new National Development Plan. This alignment as mentioned by other colleagues ensures that its development initiatives contribute directly to the national development agenda, while supporting the global SDG framework.

On the upgrading and maintenance of rural roads, the maintenance of access roads used to include FRA and non-FRA roads used to be done by different contractors, but now it would be the sole responsibility of FRA as it is aligned to their mandate. Previously, the Ministry would submit to the Ministry of Finance to allocate funds to maintain these roads, but there was no dedicated agency willing to take the responsibility for the repairs and upkeep. Now, the budget has been allocated to FRA. Prior to the two financial years, the Ministry has also been constructing farm roads through its rural programmes. Once these roads are commissioned, then the PWD and FRA will continue to provide ongoing maintenance.

Annual Budget Provision, Mr. Speaker, Sir, just very quickly on the collaboration with international partners. The Integrated Rural Development Fund has been utilised by the Ministry and the Divisional Commissioner's Office is the primary coordinating agency. These have led to tangible development outcomes. For instance, JICA supported a project in Nawaikama in Gau. The Rotary Pacific assisted with water projects in Koro and of course DFAT AusAID providing assistance towards the Vunisea Hospital. Furthermore, as we heard the Ministry partners with UNDP's Governance for Resilient Project, strengthening of operational capacity and ensure sustainable development outcomes. Through these partnerships, the Ministry continues to leverage external expertise, working with their staff to enhance service delivery.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there was some mention about the new National Disaster Risk Act 2024. Under these new provisions of the Act, the Ministry has formally recognised the roles of municipal councils. They play a vital role and the respective divisions in emergency operations. Previously it was the Commissioner's Office, and the municipal councils were not explicitly recognised under the legislation but now they are. Under these new requirements, the municipal emergency operation centres to be established, as well as any disaster risk management plans to be developed under the municipality. This significant initiative under the Act is the Disaster Risk Management Fund. So, the Fund is there so that the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) can provide financial support to the municipalities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, the Coalition Government remains firmly committed to strengthening public financial management and improving service delivery and safeguarding public resources. The implementation of the Committee's recommendations is not merely an administrative exercise, but it is a fundamental pillar of public trust and good governance.

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank all the honourable Members who have contributed positively to the debate, and we have taken note of the points addressed. On that note, I fully support the motion before the House and thank you, Sir, for the opportunity.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

**CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT -
iTAUKEI AFFAIRS BOARD 2015-2022 ANNUAL REPORTS**

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

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Report on the iTaukei Affairs Board 2015-2022 Annual Reports, which were tabled on 18th July, 2025.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee noted that the iTaukei Affairs Board continues to serve as the key governmental body responsible for the welfare, cultural preservation and development of Fiji's indigenous *iTaukei* communities as its mission includes promoting social, economic and cultural wellbeing of the *iTaukei* community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee in its deliberations highlighted six key findings:

- (1) The iTaukei Affairs Board is concerned about the *iTaukei* youths who are away from the village for a longer term under the seasonal work programme. Hence, the youths are unable to contribute towards community development back home in Fiji.
- (2) The iTaukei Affairs Board conducted a leadership awareness programme for the *iTaukei* community in are few provinces only.
- (3) The iTaukei Affairs Board faced financial challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic where provincial rates fell by 30 percent and a further 20 percent decrease was noted from investments income.
- (4) The Committee noted that traditional iTaukei customs emphasize patriarchal leaders' approach which limits the opportunity for women to participate in the decision-making process especially at village level.
- (5) The iTaukei Affairs Board continues with community development programme in partnership with Job for Nature, Global Environment Facility and World Bank to support community development.
- (6) The iTaukei Affairs Board assisted 40 villages under the Village Improvement Scheme which is now being renamed as the Village Transformation Initiative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee then came up with eight recommendations, the iTaukei Affairs Board:

- (1) must collaborate positively with the National Employment Centre on any foreign employment scheme under the *Vuvale and Duavata* Partnership Agreements;
- (2) should immediately undertake a survey in all villages to determine the number of youths who are away under the Foreign Employment Scheme and those who have moved from the villages to urban centers;
- (3) should ensure fair employment opportunities for all our youths from the respective villages applying under the two schemes;
- (4) must ensure leadership and governance training for *iTaukei* leaders to be extended to all provinces;
- (5) must conduct training in collaboration with FNU and other non-government organisations in villages for women to participate in decision making and taking up leadership roles;
- (6) must monitor and provide relevant support towards the preparation and submission of Provincial Council Annual Financial Reports;

- (7) should work closely with other relevant ministries to enhance and expand the Job for Nature Programme for youths and women across Fiji; and
- (8) should provide the scope of work to determine the total cost for the development and beautification of the remaining villages under The Village Transformation Scheme.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the Committee noted that the iTaukei Affairs Board played a crucial role in reducing inequalities within the Fijian society particularly for the *iTaukei* population by focusing on improving livelihoods, promoting sustainable development and fostering economic empowerment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the iTaukei Affairs Board is also actively addressing climate change particularly its impact on rural communities and *iTaukei* population as they focus on enhancing resilience, mainstreaming climate change adaptation into development programmes and utilise traditional knowledge to improve adaptation efforts here in our homeland. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we discuss this Report before the august House, the Committee applauds the achievements of the iTaukei Affairs Board under the period of review.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee looks forward to the implementation and commitments on the recommendations put forward by the Social Affairs Committee.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I have a list with me. Each of the honourable Members have seven minutes to deliver his or her statement.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the Consolidated Review Report of the iTaukei Affairs Board's Annual Report 2015-2022. I begin by thanking the Standing Committee on Social Affairs for its thorough deliberations and constructive recommendations.

The iTaukei Affairs Board was mandated under the iTaukei Affairs Act 1944 and its regulations remain central to safeguarding the rights, welfare and cultural heritage of our people while adapting our institutions to modern development realities. The Committee's findings highlight both the achievements and challenges.

One key concern from the Committee is the prolonged absence of our youths under the Overseas Labour Mobility Scheme. While these opportunities provide vital income, they also affect village lives and development. I wish to ensure the House, that our Ministry and the Board are working closely with the National Employment Centre to ensure fair access and better monitoring of those who went over for labour, either in Australia or New Zealand.

Importantly, research with balance of power has already been conducted on the social impact of these schemes. A pilot study carried out in 29 villages in Tailevu has provided evidence on how labour mobility affects families and communities, and this will guide the integrated programme for our young people when they return.

In regard to leadership and governance training, this is another critical area. The Committee recommends that training be extended to all provinces, and it is already underway. In partnership with the Fiji National University and the Great Council of Chiefs, we have commenced the Vanua Leadership Programme to develop and train the next generation of leaders. This will strengthen both traditional and modern governance structures, and ensure that leadership across the *vanua* is robust, inclusive and future-ready.

The Committee has also rightly noted the limited participation of women in village decision-making. The iTaukei Affairs Board will expand programmes in collaboration with FNU, NGOs and UN agencies to train women for leadership roles. By empowering women at every level of decision making, we honour our national commitments to gender equality and Sustainable Development Goal. On strengthening provincial council, my Ministry will provide greater support for timely financial reporting and accountability. This will ensure transparency and improve the governance of resources at provincial level.

The Committee also acknowledged the success of the Village Improvement Scheme, now renamed as Village Transformation Initiative. To-date, 40 villages have benefited, and I am pleased to confirm that the Government had scaled its programme to reach over 300 villages in this financial year, ensuring that our rural communities are vibrant, attractive and resilient.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the iTaukei Affairs Board has also made strong contributions to sustainable development. A Job for Nature Programme implemented with the World Bank and global and environmental facilities had already support more than 12,000 individuals or 642 groups through conservation, deforestation and sustainable livelihood projects.

The Committee also observed that earlier annual reports made limited reference on sustainable development goal. I wish to ensure this House that going forward, all planning documents and annual reports for the Board will be aligned with SDG and National Development Plan. This will ensure that our development and global efforts are globally consistent while addressing the local needs of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite the financial and operational challenge faced, particularly during COVID-19 pandemic, the iTaukei Affairs Board has stayed on course. The Committee review validates the progress made and with recommendations, we will continue to strengthen governance, leadership, gender equity, youth empowerment and sustainable village development.

In conclusion, I commend the Committee's Report, and I affirm that we will continue to work on the recommendations of the Committee. I support the motion.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you, for allowing me to contribute on the motion that is on the floor.

First, I join the honourable Minister in acknowledging the good work undertaken by the Committee responsible in the preparation of this Report. Although some components of the Report we can say are old, but of course it is bringing us very close to the current period and we must acknowledge all the work undertaken to bring this Report to the floor of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I prefer to start with Recommendation 4.4 where the iTaukei Affairs Board must monitor and provide relevant support towards the preparation and submission of provincial council annual financial reports. I know that most honourable Members of this august House will agree that if we look at all the ministries, there are two that probably had the most in terms of the numbers of outstanding reports:

- (1) Ministry of Local Government; and
- (2) Ministry of iTaukei Affairs.

There are many contributing factors, but what I would like to say and propose to the honourable Minister, and I thank the honourable Minister for his commitment on 4.4 that it is the

serious responsibility of the current leadership to ensure that this is maintained. As I have stated, there are many contributing factors, but Permanent Secretaries particularly, they are as the chief accounting officer for ministries, they must take ownership. It must be part of their performance monitoring criteria, it is important that they make timely reports because of the taxpayers funding that are utilised in the day-to-day administration and the major projects that are undertaken in the Ministry. I would again urge the honourable Minister, the Permanent Secretary and the staff.

I know that a few years back the *Roko Tui* had their salaries adjusted. They were promoted to principal level as opposed to the senior level in which they used to be remunerated. That in itself should demand the necessary performance from the *Roko Tui*, working together with the Board and the Office of the Permanent Secretary to ensure that there are timely reports. Again, important is the capacity within, and I hope that we will put the right people in the right posts so that people perform according to expectations.

The other one is on Recommendation 4.5 - Work closely with other relevant ministries to enhance and expand the jobs for nature programme for youths and women across Fiji. On women, the operationalisation of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), this I think is consistent across, not only in certain ministries, but in all sectors as well and hopefully it will trickle down to our communities. Our women need to be supported and empowered.

I remember Vunivutu Village in Macuata. I am not sure whether there are other villages but the *Turaga ni Koro* post is held by a lady, so *Marama ni Koro* probably. It is something that is unique. She does a marvellous job. We know that during *TC Ana* and the other disasters in the Northern Division, this is one lady who really delivered to the expectations of the Ministry. There was a major project as well – the completion of the village community hall and Macuata had their Provincial Council meeting in the village. This is what we need to see encouraged in our local communities.

There are economic opportunities as well. It is not only Job for Nature. I speak particularly in terms of post-disaster cash for work programmes. One thing that we need to, and I would suggest to the Ministry, if we can identify skills that are already in our local communities. When it comes to disasters, we were after carpenters, plumbers, electricians, et cetera including retirees. We have talked about retirees today, most of them are in these communities. With the cash for work programme, I know that there are other initiatives by UNDP to empower our women, because CEDAW is not only about empowering them in terms of leadership, but in their economic participation as well.

Lastly, I totally agree that we need to be careful about our youths leaving for foreign employment opportunities. I know that in the Lomaiviti Provincial Council a few years back, one *Mata ni Tikina* raised his concern about who is going to do the *were koro* if all these youth go, so there must be close consultation because we also need them.

There are benefits but at the same time, there are consequences as well. We need to look at the balance between the two because as much as we want to send our youths across, but at the same time, they have responsibilities in their local communities, and these are the ones that will take over the leadership in the years to come. And of course, they need to be given the opportunity as well.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to speak in support of the motion to accept and adopt the Consolidated Review Report of the iTaukei Affairs Board Annual Reports from 2015 to 2022. At the outset, I wish to commend the Committee and the Chairperson for their diligent

review of this important body of work.

Before I begin, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to pay tribute to the late Mr. Maciu Navakasuasua. Mr. Navakasuasua is a former explosive expert and a key proponent of the Nationalist Vanua Tako Lavo Party. Mr. Navakasuasua was also one of the key proponents of the 2000 *coup*. Mr. Speaker, Sir, at one stage, he was being accused of undertaking so many things. But lo and behold, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Mr. Navakasuasua made a 180-degree turn, shifting to the acceptance and realization that we can only fully maximize the full economic potential of this country, if our two races work together.

Before his demise, Mr. Navakasuasua worked closely with the New Valley Processors Pte. Limited, a co-operative made up of predominantly Fijians of Indian descent to promote the cultivation of cowpea to over 200 farmers in the Ra province. This project is backed by the Office of the Prime Minister and is set to transform farming in the rural areas of Ra. May his soul rest in peace and rise in glory.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the iTaukei Affairs Board continues to play a central role in advancing the social, economic and cultural well-being of the *iTaukei*. Its mission is clear, to strengthen traditional governance, preserve cultural identity and promote empowerment of the *iTaukei*. There are a number of Acts that has been established in order to guide the work of the iTaukei Affairs Board, and one of the important things that I have noted, under Section 22 of the iTaukei Affairs Board 1986, for the iTaukei Affairs Board to consider a draft legislation and any interest relating to health, welfare, peace, order and good governance of *iTaukei*. And the Minister from time to time to refer to the Board and make decisions or recommendations on any issues relating to the *iTaukei*.

I would just like to raise two issues with regards to the recommendations that have been made, particularly Recommendation 4.4 as highlighted by the honourable Leader of the Opposition – the iTaukei Affairs Board must monitor and provide relevant support towards the preparation and submission of provincial council financial reports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you note, the iTaukei Affairs Board is quite up to-date with their annual reports, in terms of the submission of the report, but unfortunately, it is not undertaking that role in terms of policing the provincial councils. I was a former Member of the Public Accounts Committee and we noted that financial reports coming from provincial councils were not up to-date - Ba, Bua, Lau, Rewa, Serua where audits were late and have only been completed until 2022. The Office of the Auditor-General have yet to receive 2023 and 2024 draft financial reports.

For other provinces like Cakaudrove, Kadavu and Macuata, all the audits have been completed until 2018 and the drafts for 2019 to 2022 had been received by OAG. For Lomaiviti, Nadroga, Navosa, Naitasiri and Namosi, they are yet to submit their draft financial statements. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is only when we address these issues at the provincial level, then we will be able to expect the effects of the development to trickle into our various districts and villages.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other issue that I would like to raise is on the governance issue. As I have said, the iTaukei Affairs Board has a very important role in uplifting the *iTaukei*, but unfortunately it needs to improve its role. It is disappointing when we look at some of the services that are expected to be expected by an *iTaukei* are not being delivered. I have another recommendation to make, and I know the honourable Leader of the Opposition has already raised that, in terms of looking at the minimum qualification requirement for some of our positions and also the re-advertisement of some of these positions to meet the MQR. Of course, intensive training needs to be undertaken. This includes training for *Turaga ni Koro*, Assistant *Roko* and *Roko* in our

provinces. Last week one Assistant *Roko* from Bua came to my office looking for information and how we can help. Since he had worked previously in Gau, he said that he is trying to develop another project in Gau using the private sector. These are the type of qualities with some of the *Roko* so they can become a catalyser for the development in the rural areas. So, I would like to thank the Committee for the Report and hope that most of the recommendations will be taken on board.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for the opportunity to speak to this Report. At the outset, I would like to thank the Committee that has put together the reports outlining the findings and the recommendations. I will only address two of the recommendations.

Recommendation 4.2 on the iTaukei Affairs Board must ensure leadership and governance training for *iTaukei* leaders to be extended to all provinces. I take it from the wording of the recommendation that the training is being undertaken and that they want to sort of zap it up so that it extends to all the different provinces. I think it is important for us also, as I was reading some of the things that they have in the iTaukei Affairs Board legislation, it says and I quote, "...the duty of the board is to consider draft legislation, rights, interest, health, good governance of the *iTaukei* people." I think it is important when you are looking at this leadership programme, we need to be fairly clear what these leadership programmes are supposed to achieve. A lot of times, when you talk about how effective, that means you talk about the number of people attending the courses, or how many people are happy with it, et cetera. I am totally for this programme, the zapping up of these programmes must be directly related to what it is you want to achieve.

Let me give an example in health. In health right now, the biggest thing that is affecting all of us, in particular *iTaukei* is NCDs, HIV/AIDS. Now we have 3,000 cases of HIV/AIDS in Fiji now. Two years ago, we had 500 cases, if I am not mistaken. It has really gone up and 90 percent of these cases are *iTaukei*. These are some of the things that when you are talking about the leadership programme, we need to be able to address these sorts of issues that are attacking our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we talk about NCDs, one of the things that gets to me is that everyone in health, the honourable Minister will know about this, second hand cigarette smoke. When you go to village community halls, even though we are not supposed to smoke, people still smoke. I ask myself, where is the leadership that puts the health of the *iTaukei* in those villages as a priority? This is the kind of thing that I am talking about. We are talking about zapping up the leadership, it must be directly related to what it is that we want to achieve. I think health is a very, very fundamental important thing for us. We have talked about HIV/AIDS. I know the honourable Minister has already talked about his great plans, the plans that he has to battle the scourge that we have. We also have this NCD thing that is happening to us, the sugary drinks and all that but this is one thing that gets to me all the time - cigarette smoking in community halls and the leadership sits there and allows it to happen. You know when you are smoking, you are killing yourself. When you are taking things that kill you and you give it to other people, you are also killing them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know this is not an easy thing for us *iTaukei* to do, to tell people, "*hey, sa cegu mada na kana tavako eke*" because the lives of people around us are more important. So, I think as we are talking about this leadership thing, sometimes it is those little things. You teach the art and the technique of leadership but having the gumption to put your foot down and put the lives of people first, that is a very important thing.

When we are talking about leadership, I think I am totally for it, but we need to get down to the brass tacks of what it means to be able to make decisions that people do not like, but you have to do it in order to look after the people that you serve. I totally agree with this leadership but maybe we need to look - what other indicators of leadership that tells you that leadership training is working?

Is it when all the community halls in our Fijian villages, people stop smoking in those areas? Some of them do. I have experienced it. I know and I have gone through this battle myself but that is one of the things I am talking about. I am totally for this, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We need to be able to address this.

Since my time is going, let me go to the second me. So, totally for training but I think we need to make sure that it is focusing. *O keda na iTaukei, so na gauna sa sivia tale vei keda na veidokadokai* but life is life. If you do not prevent second hand smoking, *na levu ni noda veidokadokai* people are still going to die. I tell people in my church, if you are smoking and killing yourself when you give that to someone, you are also helping to kill that person. We have this fine balance between our iTaukei etiquette and dealing with these sorts of issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other one that I have is iTaukei Affairs Board must monitor and provide relevant support towards the preparation and submission of Provincial Council Annual Financial Reports; totally agree. As being mentioned before, when the previous government came into place, they had to deal with all of the audit reports from the year 2000. They brought it up to the year 2015, all kinds of issues. I am a former member of the iTaukei Affairs Board. I have seen the documents that came to us - backlogs, missing documents, back to the Qarase government time, unqualified staff. I do not know, maybe sometimes in these provincial councils you think, *tou tauri koya ga* because he is from our province; that is the problem. In order to be able to do these things, we have to stick by the principles of meritocracy immaterial who it is. A person must have the merit ability to do it.

The other thing that I think is related, since I have got one minute left, in our institution, the iTaukei Affairs Board, we muddle up the way, we are not too clear as to who is responsible for what. Let me give you an example. In the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, the Permanent Secretary who is supposed to look after the Ministry, the policy second body also functions as the CEO for the execution arm which is the iTaukei Affairs Board.

Normally in the Ministry of Public Works, the Permanent Secretary there looks after the policy setting. When it comes to the work that was done by Water Authority of Fiji which is the executive arm, that does the operation or Energy Fiji Limited someone else sits there. So, when you have the same person sits there who is accountable to who? Maybe I think this is part of the problem, I am just thinking about this, maybe this sort of muddled approach to how we lead organisations is having an impact, leading to some degree to the delayed audit reports and all that, over the years. These are not easy issues to address, but I agree with this sentiment that we have here that we should provide relevant support towards the preparation submission, but maybe we should also look at the governance structure in which all of these things are being done, because that might impede doing what we want to achieve.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I speak on the motion, let me pay my tribute to Mr. Isoa Talemaibau. Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we first got into Government, I had the pleasure of meeting Isoa. He was the Head of Budget in the Ministry of Finance, and together with the Permanent Secretary, Shiri Gounder, and many other senior staff, transitioned very efficiently, quickly to very neutral civil servants to support me as Minister of Finance and to support the Government of the day.

I know the Permanent Secretary himself and all the staff that work with him, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are devastated at this news of his loss and on behalf of the Permanent Secretary and all the staff in the Ministry of Finance, we remember him as a very deeply compassionate, caring, but more importantly an effective and efficient civil servant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my view, he, amongst a number of them was one of the most meritorious appointments as a Permanent Secretary, and my interaction with him for the last two years has been just one of a man who was deeply committed to the country in the service of the people of this country. So, on behalf of everyone I pay my deepest respect, pass my deepest condolences and sympathy to Mrs. Talemaibau, children and his entire extended family.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know most of the members who spoke before me have highlighted the issues about governance. The Ministry of Finance in the 2025-2026 Budget, has introduced key reforms to strengthen public financial management and streamline processes across all ministries and agencies. We have done a number of things, including the removal of the Requisition to Incur Expenditure, what we call RIEs, revised virement authorities, consolidation of personal emoluments, fund controls, VAT now included across all SEGs. So, these are changes that we have made to ensure that we modernise our financial management, improve accountability, and ensure that every ministry and agency delivers value for money for the funding approved by Parliament.

With respect to Government funding, the Government has continued to support the board and the 14 provincial councils through the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, and we find that the utilisation rates have generally been strong, and most years have recorded 100 percent. In fact, since we have come into Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the first budget, we increased the provincial council grants from \$4 million to \$10 million. For the iTaukei Affairs Board, from \$2 million to \$3 million. The budget is really designed to ensure that the issues that honourable Members raised at the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs or the iTaukei Affairs Board should undertake, in our view, has seen a significant boost in the last two budgets. I know most of the honourable Members talked about governance, the operation, the effectiveness of the Board and financial management. I think those are very, very important points and the recommendations that have been made to strengthen the financial management governance of the iTaukei Affairs Board.

Interestingly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I looked at the members of the Board in 2018, and I see the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Jone Usamate, honourable Semi Koroilavesau and honourable Mereseini Vuniwaqa at that time, and the former prime minister. Then I saw a line at the bottom that says, “there was only one Board meeting held in the year August 2018, all the decisions are made by flying minutes”. I mean, I take honourable Usamate’s point. I think it is important that the Board members, the Management of iTaukei Affairs Board must undertake a very effective, efficient and financial management strategy so that the benefits of the funding that is allocated actually filter down to the people who matter.

I agree with honourable Usamate, in fact, it is not just in the village community halls, if you go around you will see the number of people who smoke and drink grog and pass on to so many others, honourable Virendra Lal knows that. I know he has been advocating against that for many years. These are, cultural habits, societal habits that I am glad, you actually talked about it. I think we should all talk about it and ensure that we remove some of these habits that endanger not only the lives of those who engage in that or indulge in that, but also people around them.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the report and thank the honourable Members of the Committee for the report that was presented to Parliament.

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank all the honourable Members that have contributed positively to the debate that we took note of all the points that have been addressed here in this august House. On that note, Sir, I support the motion before the House.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of the sitting today. Before, I adjourn our session, I think it would be in order for me to express on behalf of all of us, you, the Members of Parliament, and now your Secretariat, our sincere condolences on the passing of the Permanent Secretary of Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management – Mr. Isoa Talemaibau, may his soul rest in peace.

Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 5.49 p.m.

ANNEXURE I

Reply to Written Question No. 141/2025 tabled by the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts (Ref. Page 1779)


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

Reply to Question No. 141/2025 by honourable I. Vasu, is as follows:

Mr. Speaker,

I refer to the Oral Question raised by honourable Kuridrani on the expected beneficiaries of the iTaukei Resource Owners Support and Development Fund for the 2025-2026 financial year.

At the outset, I wish to clarify that the honourable Member's question touches on two separate but complementary facilities:

- (1) The iTaukei Resource Owners Support and Development Fund, managed by the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs in partnership with Merchant Finance Limited (MFL) and the Fiji Development Bank (FDB); and
- (2) The iTaukei Development Fund Facility, administered by the iTaukei Land Trust Board (iTLTB).

Both funds are designed to uplift our iTaukei landowning groups – the mataqali, yavusa and their companies – though they operate under different criteria and mechanisms.

iTaukei Resource Owners Support and Development Fund

For the 2025-2026 financial year, Government has allocated \$3 million to this Fund. From this allocation, it is expected that 60 projects will be supported through MFL (20 existing and 40 new) and five projects through FDB. Provinces already engaged include Tailevu, Macuata, Ba and Nadi with more expected as new applications are lodged.

The Fund's eligibility and scoring system is transparent and requires:

- Proper registration and legal recognition of the landowning group.
- A viable business plan with realistic cashflows.
- Demonstrated governance and broad landowner support; and
- Commitment to sustainable use of land and resources.

Milestones achieved in 2024-2025 include:

- 11 projects worth \$291,000 approved through MFL;
- 8 projects worth \$331,000 submitted to the Ministry of Finance; and
- The Tailevu Provincial Company securing a \$3 million facility through FDB, with subsidised interest.

Subdivision projects in Nadi and Lautoka were also successfully supported.

The shift from a grant-based scheme to an interest-subsidy model has been the key reform, promoting accountability while easing borrowing costs. To address challenges in technical capacity, a Project Management Unit is being established to provide oversight, training and monitoring.

iTaukei Development Fund (iTTLTB)

The iTTLTB administers a separate but complementary initiative, the iTaukei Development Fund Facility. This facility has directly supported 23 landowning units across nine provinces, distributed as follows:

- Ba – 7 units
- Naitasiri – 4 units
- Nadroga/Navosa – 3 units
- Macuata – 2 units
- Ra – 2 units
- Tailevu – 2 units
- Cakaudrove – 1 unit
- Kadavu – 1 unit
- Rewa – 1 unit

In addition, seven co-operatives have benefitted, made up largely of mataqali and yavusa members. These include examples such as the Dreketi Mahogany Landowners Co-operative in Macuata. With both landowning units and co-operatives, the total number of groups supported stands at 30.

The eligibility and selection process under iTTLTB is comprehensive and rigorous, ensuring only well-prepared and sustainable ventures are supported. Applicants are required to provide:

- Legal standing: Registered trust deeds, Joint Card/TIN and VKB confirmation.
- Business viability: Detailed business plans, projected cashflows, supplier quotations, and, where relevant, farm reports from the Ministry of Agriculture.
- Financial health: Six months of bank statements, existing loan statements, and for operating businesses, three years of financial statements.
- Security: A valuation report of the property or lease to be mortgaged, consent from 51 percent of LOU members for assignment of lease monies, and in some cases security over machinery, vehicles, or even ship mortgages for maritime ventures.

This approach balances opportunity with responsibility, safeguarding funds while enabling landowning units to unlock the value of their land and resources.

While a numerical “scoring system” is not used, these criteria collectively form a merit-based framework. Applications are prioritised based on the strength of the business plan, financial health, quality of security offered, and broad community support. This ensures that only projects with strong potential for long-term sustainability are financed.

Conclusion

Mr. Speaker, while the Ministry’s Fund and the iTTLTB’s Fund are separate, they are mutually reinforcing. Together, they provide complementary avenues for landowning groups to access finance, build enterprises and grow wealth.

Both initiatives strengthen iTaukei entrepreneurship, promote accountability, and most importantly, contribute to the economic wellbeing of iTaukei communities and the alleviation of poverty.

Respectfully submitted

Hon. Ifereimi Vasu
Minister for iTaukei Affairs
29 September 2025