

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

THURSDAY, 4TH DECEMBER, 2025

[CORRECTED COPY]

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THURSDAY, 4TH DECEMBER, 2025

The Parliament met at 9.39 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Minister for Defence and Veteran Affairs; the honourable Minister for Information; honourable Professor B.C. Prasad; honourable P.D. Kumar; honourable S.S. Kirpal; and honourable K.K. Lal.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Wednesday, 3rd December, 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 today's sitting. I also welcome all those joining us in the public gallery and those tuned in via television or through our online platforms. Thank you for staying connected and engaged in the proceedings of Parliament.

Visitors – Waibogi Wainadiro Primary School

Honourable Members, please, join me in warmly welcoming the students, teachers, and parents of Waibogi Wainadiro Primary School in Serua.

On behalf of the honourable Members, I warmly welcome you all to your Parliament. I hope that this visit will expand your understanding of how Parliament works and provide a significant awareness of the vital role Parliament plays in upholding democracy.

Acknowledgement – Honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua

Before I move on, I acknowledge the Deputy Speaker's kind assistance for presiding in my absence over the House sitting yesterday and the afternoon of Tuesday. I am most grateful.

Extension of Time - Standing Committee on Economic Affairs' Reporting Back to Parliament

For information of honourable Members, I have received correspondence from the

Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs for the extension of reporting back time on the following Bills:

- (1) Work Care Bill 2025 (Bill No. 7 of 2025);
- (2) Accident Compensation (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Bill No. 8 of 2025); and
- (3) Employment Relations (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Bill No. 27 of 2025).

The Standing Committee was expected to have reported back on these three Bills at this November-December sitting period. The Standing Committee has informed that honourable Members need to undertake further consultations on the Bills, hence the request for the extension of reporting back time.

Honourable Members, does any Member oppose this request?

I hear none. Thank you, honourable Members. There being no objections, the extension is hereby granted, and the Standing Committee shall report back on the three Bills at a later sitting of Parliament.

PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND CERTAIN DOCUMENTS

The following Report was tabled by the Minister 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 Economic Affairs

Fiji Financial Intelligence Unit 2024 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 5 of 2025*)

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

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

- (1) Minister for Health and Medical Services;
- (2) Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts;
- (3) Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection;
- (4) Minister for Agriculture and Waterways;
- (5) Minister for Policing and Communication (two Statements);
- (6) Minister for Fisheries and Forestry; and
- (7) Minister for Finance, Commerce and Business Development.

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

Non-Governmental Organisation Grants

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, honourable Members of Parliament, members of the public joining in the gallery and from their places of work and their homes; *ni sa bula vina'a* and a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to deliver this Ministerial Statement on the Ministry of Health and Medical Services' annual grants to Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), an important investment that

strengthens Fiji's health service through strategic and longstanding partnerships with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs).

The Ministry's annual NGO grant supports a wide network of civil society partners that deliver essential health and social services across Fiji. The Government recognises the vital and irreplaceable role that NGOs play in complementing national health programmes, particularly in reaching vulnerable population, delivering specialised care, delivering community-level services and meeting people's health service needs that Government alone cannot always fulfil.

These organisations are embedded in our communities and work at the frontlines of healthcare and social support services, directly interacting with our population. They provide counselling, rehabilitation, disability services, emergency response and community health promotion. They are crucial to ensuring that essential services flow beyond the walls of our health facilities and directly into the heart of our communities. Our NGO grant programme is, therefore, more than just a financial support - it is a national investment in partnership, inclusion and equitable health services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, grant funding is guided by five priority pillars that align with the Ministry's strategic direction under the National Health Strategic Plan:

- (1) Counselling and Rehabilitation Services
Covering mental health, substance abuse treatment, psychosocial counselling and rehabilitation services.
- (2) Long Term Care
Supporting care for the elderly, chronically ill, terminally ill and persons living with disability.
- (3) Primary Health Care
Strengthening NCD prevention, health promotion and healthy settings.
- (4) Sexual Reproductive Health and Maternal Health
Including targeted interventions for HIV and Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) prevention.
- (5) Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)
Supporting safe water, sanitation, and hygiene efforts at the community level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry notes that for the WASH pillar, it continues to try and improve on its utilisation and will work to encourage more engagement from our non-governmental sector in this area.

For the 2025-2026 cycle, majority of the proposals received were for Primary Health Care, Counselling and Long-Term Care. The Ministry continues to encourage NGOs with WASH expertise to apply, as community hygiene is fundamental to preventative health.

On mechanisms of grant funding, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure transparency, fairness and continuity, the Government, through the Ministry, utilises two mechanisms of grant funding, as follows:

- (1) Direct Budget-Lined Grants
These are longstanding, high-impact partnerships with organisations whose services are critical to the Ministry's mandates. They include –
 - (a) Sai Prema Foundation
Through the Sai Children's Hospital at Nasese in Suva which provides life-saving pediatric cardiac services through overseas specialist volunteer teams. The grant

amount provided in the 2024-2025 financial year was \$4 million and in the 2025-2026 financial year was \$3.9 million. This funding ensures that Fijian children have access to complex cardiac procedures locally and free of charge.

The Sai Prema Foundation has conducted 421 life-saving heart surgeries for children of Fiji and the South Pacific totally free of charge, saving the families more than \$42 million. The Foundation, through the Sri Sathya Sai Sanjeevani Children's Heart Screening Centre has conducted free heart screenings to more than 39,515 children from its Centre and through outreach programmes throughout Fiji, including the rural villages and in maritime regions. Screenings have also been conducted in the neighbouring South Pacific island nations.

(b) Frank Hilton Organization

It delivers early detection, psychotherapy and ongoing specialised disability services for children. The grant provided was \$900,000 for the 2024-2025 financial year and that increased for the 2025-2026 financial year to more than \$1million. This increase reflects Government's strengthened commitment to supporting children with special needs.

From 2020 to 2024, the Frank Hilton Organization supported 2,200 children through ongoing interventions, 1,993 children were assessed and for 5,009 children, standardised assessments were conducted.

A key marker of success for the Frank Hilton Organization is the significant increase in infants and toddlers from zero to two years, accessing their services in the last few years. Data suggests that compared to January to July of 2024, there was a 95 percent increase in this age group in January to July of 2025.

Historically, children were only identified much later in life. Today, families are actively seeking help earlier, with 34 percent of referrals being self-referrals from across Fiji, demonstrating awareness, acceptance, and trust in the Frank Hilton Organization's services.

(c) St. John Ambulance

Provides critical patient transfer ambulance services, particularly in the Central Division with a stable funding of \$200,000 annually for the last three years. As of last month, there were 3,927 ambulance runs by St. John Ambulance compared to 2,200 for last year.

(2) Expression of Interests (EOI) Grants

This involves a competitive application and selection process that ensures transparency and merit-based funding to a diverse range of NGOs. The total funds allocated for this in the last three financial years were \$900,000 for the 2023-2024 financial year, for the 2024-2025 financial year, it was \$1.6 million and 2025-2026 was \$1.5 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increase of more than 77 percent from the funds allocated in the 2023-2024 financial year reflects a strong political commitment to addressing NCDs and mental health challenges through civil society partnerships.

The following are some of the key highlights of the funding allocation in this year's financial year:

(1) Mental Health and Rehabilitation

A significant increase has been allocated to expand national access to counselling and substance abuse rehabilitation –

- (a) Empower Pacific's allocation increased by 180 percent from \$150,000 in 2023-2024 to \$420,000 in the 2024-2025 financial year. It increased further to \$445,000 in the 2025-2026 financial year.
- (b) Fiji Psychological Society is a new partner receiving \$50,000.

These investments support mental health counselling, psychosocial support and the growing demand for drug and alcohol rehabilitation services.

(2) Strengthening NCD Prevention

Nine out of the thirteen funded NGOs focus on Primary Health Care and NCD risk reduction. New partners such as the Bailey Trust and The 10,000 Toes expand our community reach in diabetes and NCD prevention.

(3) Supporting Sexual Reproductive Health and HIV Response

Medical Services Pacific (MSP) \$130,000, and Fiji Disabled Persons (FDP) \$90,000.

These organisations provide essential services to vulnerable women, girls, and high-risk populations, contributing to our national HIV response. For MSP, the grant has enabled them to treat and refer a total of more than 7,000 patients for the last two financial years.

(4) Increased Support for Cancer Care

The Fiji Cancer Society was allocated \$130,000 to strengthen national cancer awareness, screening, and patient support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in ensuring accountability, monitoring, and value for money, the Ministry ensures strong accountability and transparency. All grants are administered under established financial guidelines with clear reporting requirements, monitoring and evaluation frameworks, performance tracking against the five priority pillars, value for money assessments, and no duplication of Government services. This ensures that every dollar allocated contributes directly to improving health outcomes across Fiji.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry and Government reaffirm our commitment to strengthening partnership with NGOs. These organisations, large and small, are essential allies in our mission to deliver equitable, inclusive and sustainable healthcare for all Fijians.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank all our NGOs partners for their tireless service, compassion and professionalism. Their work is saving lives, strengthening communities, and expanding the reach of our national health system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those few words, I commend this Statement to Parliament.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first and foremost, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for his Ministerial Statement. As stated, these grants recognise the vital role that civil society partners play in complementing national health programmes and reaching vulnerable communities.

We acknowledge and commend the longstanding partnership between government and the civil society. The NGOs in Fiji have, historically, filled critical gaps in service delivery, particularly in remote and underserved areas where Government reach is limited. Their contributions span:

- mental health;
- maternal and child health;
- disability support;
- non-communicable disease prevention;
- HIV and AIDS education; and
- humanitarian assistance during national disasters.

These organisations often operate with limited resources, rely heavily on volunteers, and work in environments where donor funding is unpredictable. Despite these constraints, their service to vulnerable groups is consistent and impactful. For that, they deserve the appreciation of this House.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we support the Government's engagement with NGOs, Parliament must also be assured of transparency, accountability, and strategic clarity in how public funds are allocated. The honourable Minister's Statement explains the intent of the grant, but it does not provide detailed criteria for selecting NGOs to receive funding and how performance and impact will be measured.

Honourable Minister, I have a question for you in regard to the allocation of the budget that was done. There was an allocation in the last Budget to fund surgeries and treatments in local private hospitals and I think you are aware of that. Is this particular budget being utilised and whether such treatments were carried out to underprivileged citizens of Fiji? I think there was a budget on that. If not, is there any guideline on how private hospitals, like the Pacific Specialist Hospital, can access this?

Non-Government Organisations play a very important role. They have done a lot of work, and I would like to thank them for the work that they have been done, especially for the underprivileged and for people in the remote and maritime areas.

I would like to, once again, thank you, honourable Minister for updating the House and I thank all NGOs in Fiji for providing support, especially in the health sector.

Transforming iTaukei Land into Economic Power: A Strategic Progress Update

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of this august House, members of the public watching here in the gallery, Fiji and abroad; I rise today to deliver a Ministerial Statement on the strategic progress being made to strengthen the *iTaukei* economic empowerment and transform our land assets into a sustainable intergenerational wealth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Statement outlines the integrated work now undertaken through the iTaukei Wealth Fund and the iTaukei Development Fund Facility, and how these mechanisms are driving real economic outcomes for landowners across the country.

This Fund represents a fundamental shift in how we convert landownership into genuine economic power, and it is financed through the 10 percent allocation of the poundage levy approved in 2024. The purpose of the Fund is clear – to transform our land assets into a sustainable intergenerational wealth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the iTaukei Wealth Fund is strategically allocated across the five major priority areas to ensure a balanced development and long-term resilience. The first allocation sits at 25 percent is for the compensation of improvement at the end of the leases. This ensures that tenants are compensated, while allowing land to revert to its owners without financial strain.

A further 20 percent is dedicated to equity contribution and joint ventures, enabling landowning units to enter commercial partnerships and attract investment. Another 20 percent supports land development and property investments, making the Fund a powerful engine for subdivisions, infrastructure preparation, and value-adding projects.

The fourth allocation of 30 percent provides direct support for entrepreneurial ventures, empowering landowners, especially our youth, to expand businesses, start new enterprises, and build household income.

The fifth allocation, which is 5 percent, is devoted to education and skills development, and this is one of the most significant components. Under this allocation falls the iTLTB iTaukei Education Scholarship Framework, which supports *iTaukei* students who are pursuing specialised careers in critical fields such as medicine, engineering, aviation, agriculture, IT, environmental science and business management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, education is not merely a support measure, it is the mechanism that ensures the wealth we create today is sustained tomorrow by a generation fully equipped to lead, innovate and transform our land assets into high value economic outcomes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with this foundation established, I now turn to the iTaukei Development Fund Facility (iTDF), the operational arm that translates the iTaukei Wealth Fund's long-term vision into real, practical economic activities on the ground. If the Wealth Fund is our foundation, then the iTDF is the engine that moves our people forward today.

The iTDF provides landowners, individuals, co-operative groups and landowning units, with financial tools needed to mobilise their land, start businesses, and generate income. In that regard, the iTDF is currently making the most impact in two major areas.

First, the facility provides financing for land development projects and property investments. Through the iTDF, landowners now have affordable access to loans that allow them to clear land, build farm infrastructure, undertake small subdivisions, purchase machinery, or develop income-generating property assets. This is a major breakthrough for many *iTaukei* landowners who have long faced challenges with collateral and access to affordable capital.

Second, the iTDF also provides direct disbursement to landowning units for entrepreneurial ventures. This support is enabling landowners to expand agricultural operations in *yaqona*, *dalo*, ginger and livestock; invest in tourism projects; acquire fishing vessels and equipment; start retail and service businesses; and empower rural youth with viable income-generating opportunities. These ventures are lifting household incomes, strengthening village economies, and moving our communities from subsistence to enterprise.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to strengthen this policy narrative, allow me to highlight the broader socio-economic context that necessitated the establishment of iTDF.

National assessments have consistently shown income disparity, limited access to finance for *iTaukei* landowners and longstanding constraints that prevent landowners from participating fully in the modern economy.

Further, the institutional architecture supporting the Wealth Fund has now expanded through the establishment of the Qelemaroroi Holdings Limited and its subsidiaries, including a dedicated credit finance arm that will become a bank in the very near future, ensuring strong governance and long-term sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the facility is underpinned by responsible lending standards to safeguard both, landowners and the Fund, ensuring that assistance remains targeted, viable and sustainable. Additionally, the iTDFF's support extends beyond individual borrowers to landowning units, cooperatives and collective ventures, enabling wider community-based economic participation.

The early performance of the facility has demonstrated strong national uptake and clear demand across Provinces, reaffirming the economic aspirations of *iTaukei* landowners. The repayment performance indicates that fund ventures are operational and generating returns, supported by continuous follow-up and financial counselling to strengthen financial capability.

Finally, the work of the iTDFF aligns directly with the iTaukei Wealth Fund's long-term mandate, that is, ensuring coordinated development, structured land mobilisation and intergenerational wealth creation.

In closing, allow me to reaffirm that the iTDFF does not operate in isolation. It is part of a deliberate and integrated wealth-building architecture led by the iTaukei Wealth Fund. The iTaukei Wealth Fund sets the long-term financial foundation. The scholarship framework builds the human capital that will sustain our future, and the iTDFF activates landowner's entrepreneurship and economic development today. Together, they form a unified strategy to ensure that the economic future of our people is not defined merely by land ownership, but by how we use that land to build prosperity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our commitment remains firm - to empower *iTaukei* landowners to convert their land from a passive asset into a dynamic engine of wealth creation, uplifting livelihoods and securing lasting prosperity for generations to come. *Vinaka vakalevu*

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his Ministerial Statement and providing Parliament with an update on the strategic progress being made to strengthen *iTaukei* economic empowerment and transform our land assets into sustainable intergenerational wealth.

We, on this side of the House, and every Fijian will agree that Fiji's land and sea resources are owned by the *iTaukei* communities. The biggest challenge that is facing *iTaukei* communities, not only in the past, but also today, is to fully utilise their resources and convert them into cash for their own benefit, as well as contributing to the economic activity of the nation.

I, for one, after serving in Vanua Levu, have always advocated on the power of the rural economy. For that to happen, we need to empower the *iTaukei* community economically, not leaving the others behind, so that we can all progress together as a nation, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

There were some recommendations made in the past about economically empowering the *iTaukei*. One is that indigenous people are occupied in gainful employment and, hopefully, with that, they will be able to save, invest, and convert their savings into major capital projects.

Natural resources are sustainably developed, and this is exactly what the honourable Minister is stating this morning. Capacity for entrepreneurial endeavour is built at all levels. It is one thing to provide resources, particularly financial and others, but we also need the skills. We need to nurture those involved, hold them by the hand, and ensure that the environment is created for them to excel and succeed, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The capacity to market traditional skills for economic benefit is important, and I know that there probably is more that are in the pipeline in this regard.

Decision-making and capacity is developed and realised. Human resources planning and development, and, of course, capacity for financial investment and marketing.

On the commercial aspect of it, and I am thankful that the honourable Minister has clearly explained the demarcation between the iTaukei Wealth Fund, which sets the foundation, and then gradually move those that are involved into the iTDFF, that will move them to the next level with commercial projects, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Again, we agree that this can be realised through establishing *vanua* and landowning structures' commercial entities. These commercial entities are to be *vanua*-based companies, et cetera, which can be used as vehicles for utilising human and natural resources inside and outside of those structures to create economic activity.

I think that the view previously taken and, of course, we are in that direction now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that it must be emphasised that the village are not only seen as a cultural or social unit, but as an economic unit, and a sub-unit which is the family, must be allowed to produce goods and services and earn money on a weekly basis.

A few years back, when we were in the Commissioner's Office, there was a paper during Ratu Mara's days by the likes of Lagisoa Delana and a few of the then Commissioners about what we are doing now - converting the village entity into an entrepreneurial basis for *iTaukei*. Given the limited time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can fully utilise this by allowing landowners to be shareholders. Companies can be used to engage not only with other *iTaukei* ventures but also with other existing businesses. For example, a community in Sigatoka can have a contract with one of the local hotels and they just supply vegetables. There is also potential for coconuts and other resources in Cakaudrove and across Fiji. These are the potentials that are there, but requires discipline, a change in attitude, good leadership, hard work and commitment.

Gender Transformative Institutional Capacity Development Initiative

HON. S. KIRAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and Members of Parliament; a very good morning to you all and all our listeners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today we commemorate 'Thursdays in Black', a silent campaign against violence against women started by the World Council of Churches. We are commemorating the "16 Days of Activism", a campaign that runs from 25th November (International Day of Elimination of Violence Against Women) to 10th December (Human Rights Day), to raise awareness and call for an end to gender-based violence. The campaign is an opportunity to break the silence around violence, promote respect and call for collective action to protect women and girls. Beyond awareness, we need to reshape underlying social norms and power structures that cause gender inequality.

Today, I rise to update this august House on the progress, achievements, lessons learned and the future direction of the Gender Transformative Institutional Capacity Development Initiative, a programme central to Government's commitment to building a more equitable, inclusive and gender-responsive public sector, and foster a whole of Government approach to challenge and transform attitudes and practices rooted in patriarchy.

Mr. Speaker, the Gender Transformative Institutional Capacity Development Initiative (ICD) Phase One was implemented between 2021 and 2023, and targeted nine pilot Ministries and agencies, including the Fiji Police Force. The Ministry acknowledges the significant financial and technical

support from the Governments of New Zealand and Canada, and the Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM) as our civil society technical support partner.

Phase One delivered a substantial body of work, including:

- enhanced competencies of officers across the nine pilot agencies;
- establishment of Gender Mainstreaming Action Groups (GMAGs) in each of the Ministries;
- development of gender sensitisation and analysis toolkits;
- budget gender analysis products;
- COVID-19 risk management work plans; and
- rapid gender analyses in seven sectors - education, agriculture, trade and tourism, fisheries, forestry, youth and Fiji Police Force.

Mr. Speaker, as we prepared for the second phase of this programme, the Ministry undertook a candid assessment of our progress to-date. This reflection highlighted several important lessons that must inform our next steps.

Firstly, the demand for support far exceeded our staffing capacity. Simply put, the level of interest across the Government was so high, but our teams were too small to fully meet that demand.

Secondly, we recognised the need to strengthen our monitoring and evaluation systems. While many trainings and activities were conducted, the mechanisms to measure their impact, both at the institutional level and in terms of real behavioural change, were not sufficiently robust.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, we noted that several Ministries struggled to fully operationalise their Gender Mainstreaming Action Groups. Without adequate technical guidance and follow-up support, the GMAGs and their Gender Mainstreaming Action Plans could not be embedded effectively within agencies.

Finally, coordination across Government on gender mainstreaming and gender-responsive planning and budgeting remained inconsistent. While there were pockets of strong progress, a whole-of-government approach requires more structured and predictable collaboration. These lessons provide us with a clear roadmap for strengthening the next phase of implementation, Mr. Speaker, ensuring that the reforms we pursue are both sustainable and transformative. For these reasons, the Ministry commissioned a full redesign of Phase 2 in February 2024.

Mr. Speaker Sir, Phase 2, will build on Phase 1, by strengthening institutional capacities across Government and scaling up gender mainstreaming efforts.

Once again, I would like to express much gratitude to the -

- Government of New Zealand for continuing their support, for providing financial support under the Gender Action Programme *Marama-ni-Viti*.
- Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) which has come on board as well and will provide technical leadership through the Pacific Women & Girls Programme.
- Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM), our CSO partner, who will continue to provide coaching and mentoring to GMAGs and lead facilitators.

The next phase will be implemented over a five-year period from this year - 2025 to 2030, as design and first phase work has begun this year. This is anchored in a simple, but powerful goal that all Fijians - women, girls, men and boys, in all their diversity are recognised as having equal value,

equal rights to freedom from discrimination and equitable opportunities to both contribute to and benefit from our national development.

Mr. Speaker, this is not merely an aspiration, it is the foundation of a just and inclusive Fiji. The expected outcome at the end of this programme is equally significant. By 2030, we aim to have a whole-of-Government machinery with strengthened institutional capacity to undertake transformative gender mainstreaming, meaning that gender perspectives are not an afterthought, but fully integrated into public plans, policies, legislation, programmes, investments and our National Budget allocations.

In essence, Phase 2 seeks to embed gender equality into the very core of Government decision-making, ensuring that every policy and every dollar we allocate, contributes to a more inclusive and equitable Fiji for all.

The rollout of ICD Phase 2 will take place in three distinct stages. The inception phase which has started, will focus on establishing governance structures, refining workplans, and ensuring that all Ministries and Departments are aligned with the programme's objectives.

Secondly, from January of next year, core programme activities will be implemented. This period will include intensive capacity building, technical support and the strengthening of systems and processes across Government.

The final stage will consolidate the gains achieved, deepen institutionalisation, and ensure long-term sustainability of gender mainstreaming across the public sector.

Mr. Speaker, to guide and oversee this work, a high-level steering committee is being established, co-chaired by the Minister for Women, that is me, and the Minister for Finance. This committee will provide strategic direction and will convene annually to review progress and set priorities for the year ahead.

Together, these stages and governance arrangements ensure a structured, accountable, and forward-looking implementation of ICD Phase 2. Phase 2 marks a significant expansion of our work, growing from nine to now 14 line Ministries and agencies, including, for the first time, the Republic of Fiji Military Forces.

This selection was not arbitrary - it was guided by key national gender statistics that highlight where the needs are greatest and where the impact will be most transformative. For example, Mr. Speaker, all the women make up 49.3 percent of Fiji's population. They continue to be underrepresented in the labour force. Many women remain concentrated in the informal sector, a space characterised by low wages, job insecurity and limited or no social protection.

We also know that women's participation in agriculture and climate-resilient livelihoods is restricted by limited access to land, fisheries, and other productive resources. Rural women, in particular, face disproportionate barriers. For example, they must travel up to five times further than urban residents, simply to reach basic financial services.

Women continue to be underrepresented in leadership and in decision-making roles, and women-led businesses are estimated to be 2.5 times more likely to have their loan applications rejected. These disparities weaken our economy and undermine inclusive growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these realities underscore why strengthening gender mainstreaming within these 14 Ministries and agencies is not only justified, but essential. It enables us to address entrenched

inequalities, remove systemic barriers and ensure that development outcomes reach every Fijian.

For those Ministries not included formally in Phase 2, I assure this august House that they will continue to receive preliminary support so that we maintain consistency and coherence in gender mainstreaming efforts across the whole of Government.

Consultations with participating Ministries and agencies have been extensive and reflect the growing recognition across Government that gender equality is a critical development priority and requires the active engagement of all Ministries and agencies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the ICD initiative is a long-term investment in the structures and systems that underpin good governance, social justice and equitable development. When we integrate gender considerations into planning, budgeting and policymaking, we are not only addressing historical injustices, but we are building a government that is more effective, responsive, and inclusive. We are creating institutions that recognise the contributions of all citizens, ensure equitable access to resources and opportunities, and safeguard the rights and dignity of every Fijian.

The programme is, therefore, not just about women and girls, although they remain the primary beneficiaries. It is about building a society where all Fijians, regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, or social status, can fully participate in, contribute to and benefit from national development.

By strengthening the capacity of Government ministries and agencies, providing technical support, and fostering a culture of accountability and inclusivity, we are laying the foundation for a Fiji that is not only fairer, but also stronger, more resilient, and more prosperous. Thank you for this time, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to offer my sincere gratitude to the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection for delivering her Statement on the Gender Transformative Institutional Capacity Development (ICD) initiative. This whole-of-Government approach is important. Any programme serious about embedding accountability for gender equality across the public sector has our support, but that support comes with a necessary demand for thorough scrutiny.

I must use this moment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to speak frankly about the greatest contradiction facing our nation today, what we formerly call the economic paradox of the Fijian women. I stand here as a proud father, whose daughters have benefited immensely from our national education system. Like countless citizens across Fiji, I am delighted to witness our Fijian daughters achieving consistent educational triumph.

Our government's own data is undeniable. Women and girls consistently surpass men in educational attainment, particularly at the secondary and tertiary levels. They are the majority in our universities. They graduate with top honours. They are, on average, better qualified than their male counterparts.

This truly is a profound national success story and yet, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when these brilliant and highly qualified young women step out of the university gates and into the labour market, that educational success is shockingly and tragically reversed into an economic setback. That is the economic paradox.

The numbers are clear. Female labour force participation rate in Fiji remains less than half of our men. Our women face creepingly higher rates of unemployment. They earn significantly less

than men for the same work, and they remain shamefully underrepresented in senior management, on corporate boards, and even right here in this Parliament.

Our system tragically tells our women – you may achieve the highest peaks of education, but we have failed to build the necessary economic infrastructure for you to reach the summit of economic power. The root cause of this paradox is not a deficit of talent or ambition, but something far more entrenched - the unseen, uncounted and unvalued burden of care.

This brings me to a point that demands strong emphasis, especially as this gender transformative initiative seeks to redefine societal roles. We must never minimise or forget the vital and irreplaceable role of the wife and the mother. This, Mr Speaker, Sir, is often the hardest and most overlooked job in the world. It is performed without a salary, without a pension, without sick leave, and far too often without recognition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many of our women choose this life, and it is a choice we must absolutely honour and respect, but the choice is only genuine if the social and economic system does not penalise women who seek to balance caregiving with paid employment, nor should it ever devalue the profound national contribution of those who dedicate themselves fully to the home. We cannot coerce people, and we must respect their free will.

For the ICD to be truly transformative, to succeed where earlier programmes have been stalled, it must cease talking in vague terms about equality and start prioritising and funding equity for the care sector. It must put its budget directly where the problem is most acute. If we want to see more of our highly educated women in the formal economy, the ICD needs to demonstrate concrete and measurable actions on removing these structural barriers and ensure fair outcomes.

The ICD's future is not just about strengthening internal institutional capacity, it is about fundamentally building a society that recognises the work involved when a woman spends hours caring for a sick parent or cooking for her family. The goal of this initiative is not to force women into paid employment, but to ensure that the choice to focus on the home is a respected, genuine, and economically sustainable choice.

When we talk about transforming gender roles, we must equally commit to transforming public services to alleviate the severe time poverty faced by women across Fiji. We must drive the ICD forward, not just with technical training, but with a moral mandate to finally dismantle the barriers that block our educated daughters.

We must build a Fiji where every woman's contribution, whether she is leading a corporation, teaching in a classroom, or leading a home, is equally empowered and equally valued by our national institutions. I urge the honourable Minister to ensure that the future direction of the ICD reflects this deep structural commitment. Thank you, Sir.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 10.35 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.10 a.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please, join me in warmly welcoming the students, teachers and parents of Nakavika Primary School in Namosi.

(Acclamation)

You are very welcome to your Parliament, and I hope this visit will provide you with some insights into the working of your Parliament and deepen your understanding of its role in our democracy.

Honourable Members, we will continue from where we were, so for the next Ministerial Statement, I will call on the Minister of Agriculture and Waterways.

New Zealand Scoping Mission

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; *ni bula maleka na i tubutubu, gasenivuli kei na gonevuli e na Nakavika Primary school.*

I rise to present my Ministerial Statement on the recent scoping mission undertaken by the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways' Senior Officials to New Zealand from 15th November to 23rd November of this year. The scoping mission to New Zealand was aimed at strengthening Fiji's food security, climate resilience and market competitiveness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the non-sugar agriculture sector continues to grow. Regarding non-sugar agriculture export, \$328.1 million of export revenue was generated from the sale of crops and livestock produce and products, both fresh and frozen, last year.

New Zealand is a developed market with a strong agriculture and food sector. The country has a growing demand for premium, high quality, and sustainable agricultural products, driven by an increasing health conscious and eco-aware consumer base. The New Zealand market is estimated to be \$41.64 million, which is 13 percent of the total export of non-sugar agricultural produce.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways appreciates the longstanding and fruitful collaboration with the Government of New Zealand, especially in the areas of enhanced cooperation in agriculture and rural development through technology transfer, capacity building, trade facilitation and infrastructural development. This agreement includes an agreement between the Government of the Republic of Fiji, through the Ministry of Primary Industries and Challenge Livestock New Zealand Limited, signed back in 2010 and had already been completed.

There is another Memorandum of Understanding between the Pacific Island Resort Consulting Limited and the Ministry of Agriculture, which had also lapsed, and this was for one year, in 2017. The Enhancement of Market Access Partnership (EMAP) was signed in 2013.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to the agreement that the Government of New Zealand had with the Ministry, the Fiji Government has the Duavata Partnership with the Government of New Zealand. The partnership focuses on five pillars, and these are – democracy and values, economic resilience, security, social wellbeing and climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the primary objective of this scoping mission was to:

- (1) explore the strategic partnership in modern agriculture, including technology, mechanisation and climate smart farming practices;
- (2) strengthen collaboration in water management, watershed protection, growing from New Zealand's proven model of integrated water governance;
- (3) identify new and expanded export market opportunities for Fiji's agriculture products, particularly high-value crops; and
- (4) develop pathways for agriculture education, capacity building and technical exchange between the two countries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the mission, the Fiji delegation engaged with a spectrum of government agencies, distributors, research institutes, business councils and growers.

The discussions with the New Zealand Ministry of Primary Industry, focused on quarantine and biosecurity cooperation and market access for Fiji's agricultural produce. This included root crops, tropical fruits, spices, value-added products such as taro, banana, pineapple, ginger, turmeric; and bilateral quarantine agreements; joint research on managing pests and diseases; and strengthening the compliance of standard and export-bound commodities. The Ministry of Primary Industry expressed a strong interest in deepening cooperation and supporting Fiji's effort to raise agricultural productivity.

On the visit to New Zealand Agricultural Research Organisations, the delegation visited two research centres, specialising in crop genetics and soil health and nutrition management, precision agriculture, irrigation efficiency and climate change adaptation.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I wish to highlight in this august House that the Ministry has submitted an agreement to Cabinet, including areas of collaboration with these research institutions, aimed at strengthening bilateral cooperation in the agricultural research and innovation, with a focus on enhancing crop resilience, improving food system, and promoting climate-smart agricultural practices in Fiji. The partnership will facilitate joint research initiatives, capacity building and technical exchanges, aligned with Fiji's national priorities for sustainable agriculture and food security.

Waterways and catchment management was an area of our visit. The mission examined New Zealand's integrated river basins management system with a focus on flood early warning technology and riparian zone restoration, sediments and erosion control, and community-led catchment groups.

Several models are being considered for adoption in Fiji, particularly for the Rewa, Nadi, Ba and Labasa catchments, where climate-induced flooding remains a persistent threat. Noting Fiji's interest, the New Zealand Minister for Regional Development, honourable Shane Jones, indicated a possibility of having the Associate Minister and a technical team from New Zealand to travel to Fiji for site visits at the proposed waterways and water retention projects, and have further discussions on areas of collaboration that have links between his current portfolio and Fiji's agriculture sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the scoping mission has produced tangible outcomes, that will directly benefit our farmers, exporters and local communities. These benefits are:

- (1) Pathway for Export Growth
As New Zealand importers and distributors have expressed interest in fresh and frozen *taro*, cassava, and breadfruit, ginger and turmeric products, banana, pineapple, mangoes, eggplants, and *taro* leaves. Work is now underway to align our production

and quality system with market requirements.

(2) Technical Cooperation and Training

New Zealand partners have agreed in principle to support training for agriculture officers, veterinary training and exchange programmes, and joint research on climate-resilient crops.

(3) Support for Climate and Water Resilience

The mission identified potential funding for flood mitigation projects, collaborative opportunities for watershed management, and exchange of information for potential support on early warning systems and hydrological model tools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will immediately undertake the following actions, to:

- (1) conclude the Memorandum of Cooperation with research institutes in New Zealand on land-care programmes;
- (2) conduct additional technology scoping in New Zealand farms, including precision irrigation and improved seed systems;
- (3) strengthen export compliance protocols to fast-track the entry of more Fijian products into New Zealand;
- (4) scale up catchment management projects, using lessons learned from New Zealand's River Basin Framework;
- (5) review the current agreement with the New Zealand Government under the Duavata Partnership to support the need for the review of legislation, policy and standard operating procedures for non-sugarcane agriculture export growth; and
- (6) create an established network with interested importers and distributors for the supply of non-sugarcane agriculture produce; these are banana, pineapple, taro, taro leaves, cassava, ginger, turmeric, mangos, breadfruit, okra and eggplant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the scoping mission to New Zealand reinforces Fiji's commitment to transforming our agriculture sector from a system vulnerable to climate shock into one that is resilient, technology-driven, market-oriented and capable of delivering prosperity to every Fijian household. This partnership will strengthen our farmers, safeguard our waterways and energise our rural economy.

The Ministry looks forward to translating these discussions into concrete results throughout 2026 and beyond. An information paper with more details on the scoping mission to New Zealand will be submitted to Cabinet soon.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the Ministerial Statement by the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways. I must commend the honourable Minister for a very comprehensive statement on the New Zealand scoping mission.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we fully support the core goals of this engagement, that is, strengthening food security, enhancing climate resilience and boosting market competitiveness. We do hope that the collaboration between the two countries will address the current challenges faced by Fiji's agriculture sector, and that include:

(1) Climate Change Vulnerability

As farmers are highly vulnerable to the effects of extreme weather events such as floods, cyclone and droughts, it is envisioned that more funding will be available to the farmers to mitigate these risks.

(2) Biosecurity and Pest Management

There are issues with plant, pest and animal diseases that affect production and market

access. It is anticipated that more will be done to strengthen this through further training of our agriculture officers in New Zealand.

(3) Market Access and Standards

Exporters struggle to meet high standards of product certification, food hygiene and accessibility required for international markets like New Zealand. We understand that a thorough review will be done by the two countries to work out a common ground where the ease of export can be done without many restrictions.

(4) Infrastructure Deficiencies

Poor rural infrastructure, including roads, service facilities and irrigation systems hinders connectivity between farmers and markets, leading to post-harvest losses. I understand that the Ministry of Agriculture is working with the Ministry of Public Works to address these, and it is anticipated that more expertise and funding will be provided under this collaboration.

(5) Knowledge and Technological Gap

As we all know, there is a lack of farmer knowledge and skill in modern agriculture techniques and slow adoption of new technologies. As before, it will be worthwhile to see that more technical exchanges will be done by these two countries to create a pathway in terms of agriculture education and more capacity building will be done and will be on the agenda.

We certainly support the objectives of the mission. The partnership with New Zealand, I understand, will be geared towards securing our national food security and opening the export pathways that benefit all farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we hope that the momentum built by the mission will bring good results for the farmers of this nation and both countries will benefit by sharing ideas and come to a common platform where strategic partnership in all aspects of agriculture can be developed.

This mission is a great move to revamp our agriculture sector and I, once again, thank the honourable Minister for spearheading this mission.

Community Policing and National Consciousness

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to address this august House on a matter at the foundation of our nation's stability and social cohesion – the future of community policing in Fiji. This Statement carries a clear message - security is not the responsibility of the Fiji Police alone. It is a shared duty of every Fijian, every village, every settlement and every institution, working together to fulfil the vision of our National Development Plan, “Empowering the People of Fiji through Unity”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Security Strategy 2025–2029 is firm, that effective security requires a whole-of-government and whole-of-nation partnership with civil society, the private sector, academia, faith institutions, and communities working together. For community policing to succeed, it must be relevant and Fijian, shaped by our culture, diversity, identity, and aspirations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to overcome drugs, cybercrime, transnational crime, and social disorder, Fiji must strengthen national security consciousness. This is more than patriotism. It is the understanding that every Fijian is a guardian of peace, whether reporting a drug farm, protecting the children online, rejecting criminal influence, or upholding ethical behaviour, et cetera.

When national consciousness is strong, human security becomes possible. When human security is protected, national security becomes sustainable. When both align, Fiji creates a sphere of

peace, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Community policing must, therefore, awaken civic responsibility, not just enforce the law.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, human security protects people, national security protects the State. Today, with cybercrime, transnational crime, and digital harm, the two are inseparable.

Crime takes root where livelihoods are limited, connectivity is weak, markets are distant, and youth lack opportunity. This reality is visible in Kadavu, parts of Vanua Levu, some maritime islands, and other areas where marijuana farming has become an economic fallback.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no policing strategy can succeed if families depend on the illegal drug economy for survival. Therefore, community policing must integrate development services across Ministries, as follows:

- Ministry of Agriculture - cash crops and agroforestry;
- Ministry of Fisheries - sustainable harvest;
- Ministry of Youth - employment pathways;
- Ministry of Women - resilience and safety nets;
- Ministry of Trade and SMEs - rural entrepreneurship;
- Ministry of Education - prevention and digital literacy;
- Ministry of Health - addiction treatment; and
- Ministry of Policing and Communication – enforcement, plus satellite connectivity.

When Ministries work together, communities shift from illegal to legitimate livelihoods. This is the new direction of community policing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, holistic, development-driven, culturally grounded, and built on national unity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to operationalise this approach, the Ministry of Policing and Communication, and the Fiji Police Force will pilot a 20-year Kadavu Human and National Security (HNS) peace transformation plan, integrating community policing, human security, economic development, and national security. This is Fiji's security development blueprint, aimed at ending marijuana cultivation by expanding legitimate income pathways.

I call on all honourable Ministers to align Ministry programmes to support the Kadavu HNS-Peace Plan. Every Ministry holds a vital piece of this national effort. Together, we can change Kadavu's public image from "the land of drugs" to a province of security, stability and prosperity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Kadavu is the only beginning. Once refined, this plan will expand to Vanua Levu, Taveuni, Lau, Lomaiviti and other coastal and maritime provinces. This is community policing reimagined as Fiji's national peace-building project.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the security landscape has changed dramatically. Digitalisation has transformed society, and criminals have adapted faster. Transnational networks now use encrypted apps, digital payments, online recruitments and dark-web channels to traffic drugs, launder money and exploit vulnerable people. Across the Blue Pacific, transnational organised crime is now one of the most serious threats. This demands smart, connected, technology-enabled community policing, including policing in the digital space.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Duavata Community Policing philosophy remains strong in supporting:

- school patrols and awareness;
- Blue Light;

- cybersecurity programmes;
- parenting without violence;
- maritime domain awareness
- voice against violence; and
- restorative justice programmes.

These have produced positive outcomes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but today's challenges demand a new level of mobilisation.

The Duavata Community Policing philosophy operational models must evolve from scattered pockets of activities into a unified national movement - technology-enabled, culturally grounded and institutionally strong, responsive to Fiji's ethnic and cultural diversity. This reform commences with the implementation of the National Security Defence Review recommendation 2.2 on the Restore Blue Pillars of:

- (1) building trust between the people and the Fiji Police Force;
- (2) establishing Human Rights Based Policing approach; and
- (3) institutional strengthening/capacity building of the Fiji Police Force to enable it to perform the full extent of its legislative functions effectively and efficiently.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Police Force Uplift Programme, guided by the “*Fiji Police Force and Australian Federal Police Memorandum of Understanding on Solesolevaki Partnership and Police Co-operation*” is moving capacity building under these pillars, forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to be effective Community policing in *iTaukei* setting is grounding itself in the values and structures of the *vanua* and chiefly systems. For Fijians of Indian descent, an appropriate model that considers respect and responsive to their culture, faith, their temples, mosques, institutions, neighbourhood associations, businesses, et cetera, need to be developed. For Rotuman, Banaban, Chinese, part-European and maritime communities, an appropriate community policing model that respects their respective cultures earns trust and trust strengthens national unity.

The true measure of policing is how well it protects the vulnerable women, youth, children, persons with disabilities, including the LGBTQI+ community. We are aware that modern community policing must be protective, responsive, empathetic, inclusive and empowering.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji now has a homegrown culturally rooted security model - the *Solesolevaki ni Veitaqomaki: Matanitu, Vanua kei na Lotu* (CVM-CMS), launched in 2024 by the honourable Prime Minister. The model integrates the:

- *Matanitu* — Government and the security agencies;
- *Vanua* — the traditional governance; and
- *Lotu* — faith-based leadership.

After the successful pilot in Kadavu, the CVM-CMS will be expanded to Lau, Taveuni, Lomaiviti, Vanua Levu and the coastal villages of Viti Levu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to operationalise this framework, the Ministry is proposing four Police Maritime Forward Bases and four patrol boats strategically located in:

- Lakeba — servicing the Lau group;
- Levuka — for the Lomaiviti and central waters;

- Savusavu — Vanua Levu and nearby maritime zones;
- Denarau — for the Mamanuca, Yasawa and western maritime corridors.

These assets will strengthen community policing across the islands and the two main islands' coasts, while securing Fiji's vast territorial maritime domain.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I respectfully request the support of this august House and that of our international partners towards this maritime expansion. At this point, I wish to acknowledge the British Government, through UNDP, for funding the development of CVM-CMS model, its piloting and MSAF training which has empowered over 500 women, men and youth in Kadavu to earn a Boat Master's Licence and the Restricted Master Engineer Class 6 Licence.

I also thank the Government of Japan and the Australian Border Control Officers and Federal Police, for the continued assistance in Border Control Officers training, maritime security and police capability development that supports both, the security of our coastal communities and national security.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, digitalisation is now central to policing. With satellite connectivity, including Starlink, through licensed providers, rural and maritime communities would finally become:

- real-time yearly warning systems;
- reporters of suspicious vessels and drug drop-offs; and last but not least,
- active partners in national security.

Connectivity is a strategic investment in both, human and national security, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The communications portfolio now under our Ministry allows us to fully integrate policing, digital transformation, maritime vigilance, cyber safety, and community resilience into one unified whole-of-nation security strategy.

Speaking on community, Mr. Speaker, Sir, community policing and public order, a core role of the Ministry, is to maintain order not by force, but by trust, vigilance and partnership. Community policing helps communities –

- identify early warning signs;
- prevent rumors and tensions;
- de-escalate conflict;
- strengthen confidence in police; and
- prepare for emergencies.

It is Fiji's first shield in times of uncertainty.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, no nation becomes secure through force alone. No community becomes safe through policing alone and no society becomes peaceful by accident. Security is achieved when people stand together. I acknowledge the traditional leaders of all our ethnic communities and our faith-based organisations for their vital role in guiding our young people away from crime and towards responsibility.

I thank the Bose Levu Vakaturaga and traditional leaders in all Provinces for their steadfast support to community policing and national unity. I respectfully ask for their continued leadership in mobilising iTaukei communities across Fiji to stand with police, strengthen vigilance and protect our young people from marijuana cultivation, illicit drugs and other emerging crimes.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank our international partners, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, the European Union, India, Indonesia, France, South Korea, UNDP, UNODC, NGOs and civil society for their continuing support in strengthening policing, communication and national resilience. Together, we can secure our communities and safeguard our people. Together, we can build a Fiji where peace is protected, lived and guaranteed.

MR. SPEAKER.- Just before I give the floor to the Opposition spokesperson, I wish also to recognise and welcome the other half of Nakavika Primary School from Namosi for their presence here this morning. You are most welcome to your Parliament.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his Statement on community policing and national consensus. Before I do so, Mr. Speaker, I join you in thanking my friends from Nakavika, Namosi, where I spent a couple of nights at Ms Sigatabu Tikomai's house. Thank you very much for your hospitality, your care and your love. Thank you for cooking that beautiful bread in the morning,

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I went for hiking in the hills of Namosi and I stayed in a village for almost a week. I also want to thank my brother, Ashneel, from California Electrical, who sponsored rugby jerseys for the Naikavika St Gabriel Rugby team. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition agrees with the core message of the Statement, that keeping our community safe is not the responsibility of the Police Force alone. Crime prevention works best when families, faith groups, youth leaders, the business community, civil society organisations and traditional leadership work in partnership with the Police. On that principle, Sir, we stand in full agreement.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, agreement in principle must not match with the action in practice. Many communities today are dealing with rising drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and sexual offence, youth involvement in theft and street fights, street crimes, and limited police presence at night in rural and maritime areas and even in towns and cities in Fiji.

While the honourable Minister speaks on strengthening community policing, the Opposition must ask, are the existing community policing posts active, properly trained and properly supported? No!

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. V. NATH.- Ask me, and I will explain because police posts were given a dedicated police vehicle. The vehicles are sometimes not there. How can you serve a community with a radius of about 10 kilometres when you do not have a vehicle? The vehicle has been called to the fleet, maybe to the other part of Nausori. Often, when you go to Nausori Town, you will find there is zero presence of police. You go and do it yourself, honourable Minister, you will find that police presence is sometimes zero.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many volunteers work with dedication, but often without uniform, protective equipment, proper communication tool, transport or insurance cover. Good intentions alone will not keep the community safe. Community policing cannot succeed if the Fiji Police Force itself remains under-resourced or overstressed.

The Opposition continues to hear concerns about officer shortage, ageing vehicles and equipment, and here, Government Ministers are going in brand new vehicles, top-notch vehicles, even the sporting ones. Limited cybercrime and forensic capacity and welfare challenges affecting officers

and their families. If the Government truly wants the community to partner with the Police, then the Police must first be given the tools, manpower, training and support to lead from the front.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, national consistency is not created by announcements only - it is built through trust, fairness and consistent enforcement of the law. The community will be cooperative with the Police only when they see that the law is applied equally to everyone.

Justice is timely and transparent, and no one is above accountability. Schools must also play a strong role through civic education, district responsibility, drug prevention and respect for the law. Youth engagement must be proactive and not reactive.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while supporting community participation in crime prevention, we must also ensure that community policing does not become a tool of fear or politically targeting. There must be a clear training standard, proper legal boundaries, independent complaint and oversight mechanism to protect both, citizens and volunteers.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition supports the vision of shared responsibility for safety, strengthening of community policing, and the importance of building national consciousness based on law, respect and unity. The community cannot replace professionalism in policing. Volunteers cannot replace trained officers and speeches cannot replace resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we, therefore, call on the honourable Minister to ensure that there is a clear National Action Plan for Community Policing, real funding for training and equipment, strong policing welfare and recruitment support, and regular reporting to Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if these initiatives are backed by genuine commitment, the Opposition will fully support them in the interest of public safety. However, if it remains symbolic, we will continue to demand accountability on behalf of our people.

National Taskforce to Address Societal Impacts of Pornography

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I deliver my second Ministerial Statement, the honourable Member deserves a response from me as the Minister responsible for Policing.

I have never heard anyone make a statement this morning that the Police could be used as a tool to threaten our people. I have never stated that in my Statement, nor has it come from the Commissioner's mouth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is quite a demeaning statement. If the honourable Member does not understand how hard the Police Officers - men and women, are working out there in the frontline, I invite him to put on a uniform and join them in the frontline and see how difficult it is. Mr. Speaker, Sir, for someone who has worn the uniform, I know what it is like, and for the honourable Member to state that statement this morning, I believe he does not understand or was not listening to what I was saying in my earlier statement. If the honourable Member wants further briefing, come to my office and I will take you to Nabua - not to the cell, but to Nabua.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you allow me to continue, I rise to update this august House with my second Statement on the work undertaken by the National Taskforce to address the societal impacts of pornography, chaired by me and co-chaired by the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, given that 18th November marked the Day of Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, it is both timely and appropriate that I deliver this Statement in this session. Before I do that, I wish to acknowledge honourable Kamikamica in establishing this important National Taskforce and for his significant contribution and efforts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) reports that in the year 2023, 79.3 percent of Fijians aged 15 years and older used the internet, and 88.4 percent owned a mobile phone. We know that internet providers provide our young people with valuable opportunities for educational, cultural and entertainment activities, social connection, self-expression, and access to essential information and services.

We also see the increasing use of technology and the internet by our children and young people which, at times, is without control or guidance, and has, unfortunately, allowed for offenders to use it to groom and exploit our children and to share and disseminate child sexual exploitation and abuse materials.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a global challenge. I was just in Baku, Azerbaijan, recently, leading the delegation at one of the premier global conference, the ITU World Telecommunication Development Conference 2025 (WTDC 25), and I will deliver a separate Ministerial Statement on that important conference later. This global conference sets out the global digital roadmap for the next four years, and one of the key priorities discussed is the role of the ICT sector in protecting children from online abuse and defend their rights in the context of ICT.

Over the past two weeks, our officials have been leading and progressing important negotiations at the WTDC, including for a new resolution on our Pacific *Lagatoi Declaration*, which also prioritises child protection. Mr. Speaker, Sir, child safety is everyone's responsibility. That is why, as a matter of priority, the National Taskforce is addressing online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Mr. Speaker, it is important that when we talk about this subject, we must use the correct language. Globally, the phrase 'child pornography' is no longer being used as it shifts the focus from the child, we are talking about –

- child abuse and child exploitation;
- the violation of a child's innocence; and
- the violation of a child's dignity and rights.

Therefore, I would emphasise that when we talk about this subject, we use the correct language - online child sexual abuse and exploitation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, USA-based service providers are mandated by law to provide suspected online child abuse and exploitation materials on their platforms to the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, known as NCMEC. The NCMEC then refers these to the law enforcement of countries for investigation. The NCMEC reported that in the recent years, there have been approximately between 1,800 and 8,200 cyber tips for Fiji. That is unacceptable.

To address that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Taskforce's approach is built on three key pillars, which aligns to the global approach, as follows:

- (1) robust policy, legislative governance and criminal justice frameworks;
- (2) survivor support and empowerment and cultural change; and
- (3) industry cooperation.

These three pillars have been the key focus of the three working groups of the National Taskforce, which comprise Government Ministries, law enforcement agencies, independent commissions, faith-based organisations, civil society groups, academia, the ICT industry and the Opposition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the first working group, focusing on Policy, Legislation, Governance and Criminal Justice is responsible for reviewing, strengthening and modernising our legal policy and governance frameworks to ensure Fiji has the tools needed to combat this crime effectively.

A number of laws have been identified as part of our legal reform programme. These include the Online Safety Act 2018, the Telecommunications Act 2008 and the Cybercrime Act 2021.

Government remains fully committed to ensuring that our laws keep pace with the realities of the digital age and respond holistically to threats, such as those threatening our children. I would also like to assure the public that comprehensive nationwide consultations will be undertaken as part of the law review process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under our recently approved National Privacy and Personal Data Protection Policy that was led by my Communications Team, children's data are special categories of data that require heightened safeguards. This cements our commitment to protect children's data when they are being collected. We will be progressing the legal framework, and I thank the Council of Europe and the European Union, for their partnership in this particular area.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the second working group, focusing on Survivor Support, Empowerment, Society and Culture, ensures that survivors, especially children, receive the care, protection and support they need. This group also examines the societal and cultural factors that contribute to exploitation, helping us address the problem at its root.

The toll-free online safety helpline - 1548, is operational, and the Online Safety Commission has implemented a range of training and awareness initiatives to strengthen online safety across Fiji.

The Swipe Safe Programme, designed specifically for Year 9 students, equips young people with the knowledge and skills to navigate the internet safely, and the Ministry's Girls in ICT Programme and Telecentre Initiative drive digital literacy and to build a culture of cyber hygiene.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through the Train the Trainer Programme, the youth are empowered to educate their peers on responsible digital behaviour and online safety practices. In addition, the Online Safety Championship Programme is cultivating youth leaders who actively advocate for safer online environments within their communities. All of these programmes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, drive our goal of empowering our children and adults to be safe in online spaces.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am also pleased to share that the Fiji Police Force has also established a dedicated Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Unit to strengthen investigative and enforcement efforts, and to investigate the NCMEC Cybertips reports, which I referred to earlier.

The third working group, focusing on Industry and Technology Response, serves as a Taskforce's technology advisory arm. Its role is to strengthen collaboration with industry partners and develop coordinated, technology-driven approaches to detect, prevent, and respond to online child sexual abuse and exploitation. Together, these Working Groups allow the National Taskforce to tackle online child sexual abuse and exploitation in a holistic manner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also undertaking proactive measures in order to protect our children at a global level. A key milestone was that Fiji actively participated at the three-year negotiation process, which resulted in the adoption of the new UN Convention against Cybercrime, which I had spoken about earlier. This Treaty spotlights child protection online and addresses non-consensual sharing of intimate images.

Another key milestone is the signing of the Second Additional Protocol to the Budapest Convention, which we signed this year, as I had also spoken about earlier. This provides faster tools to our law enforcement to access electronic evidence while safeguarding rights.

I am also pleased to share that Fiji was unanimously elected as a Council of Europe T-CY Bureau Member in 2024, after becoming a State Party to the Budapest Convention. As a Bureau member, the Ministry of Communications has been part of a Working Group looking at AI, including the rights of a child.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another key achievement of the Taskforce has been its support in getting Cabinet approval for Fiji's inclusion in the WeProtect Global Alliance - Global Taskforce on Child Sexual Abuse Online. The Global Taskforce is a Government-led coalition dedicated to strengthening coordinated international responses to online child sexual abuse. It promotes collaboration among governments and focuses on addressing critical issues such as child exploitation, online grooming, sextortion and harmful content across digital platforms.

Nationally, a report looking at the existing national response to online sexual abuse and exploitation is being reviewed. It also proposes recommendations to guide Fiji's ongoing efforts to combat online sexual abuse and exploitation. It will be presented at the next National Taskforce meeting. I would like to thank the Australian Government for its partnership with us on this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Taskforce is expected to convene again soon. Key agenda items for the upcoming meeting will include the presentation of the mapping study and its recommendations; updates from the three Working Groups; and discussions on the next steps ahead of us. We will ensure that this House and the public are kept fully informed about the direction and progress of the Taskforce. Through the National Taskforce and its three Working Groups, we are building a coordinated, evidence-based, culturally sensitive and technically robust national response.

In closing, we must all contribute to building a child-safe environment, including in cyberspace. We call on all stakeholders to do their part in this national effort.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his Statement. He has outlined a very intricate detail – the work that has been undertaken by this Taskforce. I also thank the former Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Kamikamica, who initiated this, and the honourable Ministers who have been involved.

There are a number of things about Fiji, Sir, that we are not very proud of. I was looking at some of the data on pornography and the amount of time that is spent on it. One of the data I have shows that 1 percent of all internet traffic is devoted to this. There are about 130,000 people who spend every quarter in money to pay for data to do that.

The other thing that we do not like about what is happening in our country is HIV and AIDS - the world's fastest growing HIV epidemic - and diabetes, but this issue of pornography is something that is impacting the lives, not only of our children, but all of us.

I am glad to hear about the pillars that have been outlined. I think the honourable Minister has explained what they are doing in terms of policy, legislation, and putting in place the structures. I am also looking at the other aspects of looking after the survivors who go through the trauma of being victims of these issues, empowering them, the cultural change, and also the industry cooperation that is required.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was just looking at some of the steps here, and when we think about the impact of pornography. Sometimes, people just use it when they do not have much to do, as a way of relaxation, but the impact on the country can be very traumatic. One of the impacts is the abuse and sexual exploitation that comes to be regarded as something normal. That, I think, is dangerous.

We can do a lot of things to try to prevent people from having access to this, but if you prevent the access and the desire is still there, then that is a much deeper problem, and I do not think the Taskforce on its own can address. That is something for all of us to address. I think all honourable Members of Parliament and all communities must try to address that desire to go and look for those things. The impact it has on families and relationships, the impact it has on gender-based violence and today, as the honourable Minister has pointed out, it is Thursday in Black. I think I am wearing a bit of black.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is the economic and mental health cost. One of the big problems that we have which is hugely under-realised in Fiji is the impact of mental health issues. A lot of mental health issues are not presented, they are unrealised, and the impact on our country is great.

Over and above that, the destructive effect this can have on people's brains. It is like drugs. It can actually damage people's brains when they get involved in it. When we think about pornography and the emphasis on it, it is not only about saving our children, saving their futures, and saving their lives. It also has a direct impact on the economy and the wellbeing of the country as a whole.

I was reading, Mr Speaker, Sir, that one of the judges recently in Samoa called for all of these things to be banned. I think it was with Digicel Pacific, so I am not too sure. The honourable Minister has talked about the work that they are doing in terms of legislation. We look forward to the plans that the Ministry is coming up with. I think they have another meeting coming up soon. I think all of us in Fiji look forward to the work that is being undertaken by the Taskforce. It is still a Taskforce. I think it needs to go down to structures and programmes, et cetera, that we will work on, but it is incumbent on all of us, leaders, to make sure that we also help out in making this happen.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is very important that this is executed well. Execution is critical once the plans and programmes are in place, so that we can get real results, not just a lot of talk. For all of us on this side, and all of us together, we fully support this endeavour. It must work. It must deliver results. We must ensure that the Taskforce and those involved are able to implement it, monitor it, and improve it. This is an ulcer; this is a cancer. We must cauterise it, deal with it, and get rid of it for the sake of our children in the future.

Termite Infestation and Protection Measures

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, ladies and gentlemen, *ni sa yadra vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver my Statement on the status of termite infestation on timber used in buildings and the control measures the Ministry of Forestry is currently using.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am delivering this Statement because the issue of termite infestation on timber is a cause of concern and has become one of the critical national interests. Last week, honourable Rinesh Sharma raised the issue of termite as a supplementary question, on the Statement on Timber Research that I delivered, raising a crucial question on the role of the Ministry of Forestry in this regard.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have a total of 13 species of termites, which are all local or endemic to Fiji, but we have two main broad categories of termites that are infesting timbers in our buildings, and these are the drywood termites and the subterranean termites.

Drywood termites fly directly to the timber that they wish to attack, and their infestation can be seen in old furniture and in relatively old timber buildings, but they are not as damaging as the subterranean termites because its population is small, from a few hundred to more than a thousand. Subterranean termites, on the other hand, live underground and one nest could have a population of 60,000 to 2,000,000.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2010, the Asian Subterranean Termite (AST) with the scientific name, *Coptotermes gestroi*, one of the most destructive termite species, was confirmed to be causing massive damage to wooden structures in houses in Lautoka. It was first discovered and reported to Biosecurity Authority of Fiji (BAF) in the late 2009 and later discovered in Labasa after a Fiji-wide awareness campaign.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was assumed in 2010 that AST might have entered Fiji through infested wooden packaging materials from Asian countries. The extent of damage to infrastructure at the time strongly suggested that the AST was introduced to Fiji more than four decades ago, building up its numbers to a visibly destructive stage now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the termites tunnel their way out of their nesting place to start attacking homes, eating their way through the timber. Damages caused by the termites include structural timbers, wooden goods, paper, cotton cloth, cotton garments, certain plastics, trees, and many crops throughout the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I focus on the use of chemicals to protect timber from termite attack, it is important to stress at this point that chemical treatment is only part of the answer to our problem. In fact, proper timber specifications, the use of suitable house designs and the appropriate use of physical barriers can totally remove the need for chemical treatment of housing timbers, especially pine. This is an area that needs to be included in the current discussions on AST, and also in the overall area of chemical treatment, given the need to consider the environmental and human safety consequences of the disposal of timber products at the end of their life cycles.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the main purpose of treating timber with chemicals is to protect the timber from insect attack and fungal decay, making it more durable and be able to last longer in service. Without treatment and without using proper timber specifications and suitable building designs, many species of timber, including pine, will not be suitable for use in exposed and in-ground contact situations. Timber treatment, therefore, acts like an insurance in substantially extending the service life of timber in the absence of proper timber specifications and suitable building designs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it must, however, be noted that the treating of timber with chemicals is not compulsory. It is only when a timber processor elects to undertake timber treatment that the current legislation comes into play, to ensure that certain quality and safety standards are met. This is because some untreated timber from species such as pine can be used without any problems for some specific end users, especially for non-load bearing and in fully protected situations and out of

ground contact.

Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, timber for end users such as clear, furnished furniture, cabinets, interior linings and flooring are not treated. In general, low-grade timbers destined for boxing purposes are normally sold untreated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the same time, there are native species, like hardwood, are naturally durable and do not need to be treated. In the market, one has a choice of purchasing either treated or untreated timber, depending on one's requirements or specification.

Mr. Speaker, it is important to clearly explain the link between termite infestation and the protection measures used in the timber in the construction sector. Termites thrive when timber is easily accessible, untreated or incorrectly used in construction. In other words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the more vulnerable the timber, the more attractive it becomes to termites. That is why our protection measures must be multi-layered, involving:

- (1) proper building design;
- (2) correct timber specification;
- (3) the use of naturally durable or treated timber; and
- (4) physical barriers that reduce termite access.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, chemical treatment is only part of the solution. If timber is incorrectly specified, or if a building is poorly designed, even treated timber may still be at risk. For this reason, Sir, proper design and correct timber use are equally, if not, more important.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Forestry currently regulates the operations of all timber treatment plants in the country, as required under the Forest Regulations of 1992. Timber treatment plants are licensed annually and are monitored on a quarterly basis. The monitoring of these plants focusses on operator competency, health and safety, and quality control, where timber samples are collected for testing on a monthly basis, looking at the concentration and penetration of preservative chemicals in the timber to ensure that these are within the required standards.

Mr. Speaker, different end users have different levels of chemicals with assigned brandings, including:

- H2 - usually for interior use and is fully protected from the weather and not in ground contact;
- H3 - usually for exterior use, not in ground contact;
- H4 - usually are posts which are low risk and have ground contact;
- H5 - are poles, have high risk and have ground contact; and
- H6 - are posts and poles usually for marine use.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all licensed timber treatment plants should have the appropriate branding gears to enable them to brand their treated timbers - showing the treatment ID plant number, the chemical used and the hazard level to which the timber has been treated. One end of every piece of treated timber should be branded as described.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to stress that although the Forest Regulations of 1992 mandates the Ministry of Forestry to license and monitor the operations of all timber treatment plants, it does not authorise the Ministry of Forestry to ensure that timber users only by timber which are treated according to the legally prescribed standards.

Mr. Speaker, we can only advise and offer our assistance in the proper specification of timber and also in the inspection of the purchased timber to ensure that the specifications provided by the buyers have been followed. To this end, Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Forestry has been working tirelessly over the years, carrying out awareness and training with timber retailers and hardware shops, and also using radio talkback shows and the *Na i Katalau* TV programme to educate and raise awareness among the general public.

Mr. Speaker, consumers need to know and understand where the timber they are buying are going to be used and seek the assistance of the Ministry as well as retailers, to ensure they specify the correct products to purchase in terms of species, dimension, grade and the level of treatment (if it is going to be treated), rough or machined, and whether the timber need to be kiln-dried and properly profiled for flooring, weatherboard or lining.

Mr. Speaker, we should also understand that the supply of timber, especially for some native species, for large dimensions can sometimes take a long to produce and deliver. Ordering in advance, especially for large projects, is always advised.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as this issue of substandard timber continue to be a challenge, especially in the face of the incursion of the ASTs, the Ministry is, at the moment, exploring the possibility of developing a timber marketing regulation to also oversee the operation of timber retailers and we will be working very closely with the Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission (FCCC), in this regard.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I again wish to reiterate that treating timber with chemicals is only part of the solution. Proper design of buildings and proper specification of building materials and ordering in advance, all go a long way in ensuring that we are better protected, especially against termites.

Last but not least, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank you and your staff for your support and guidance throughout this year. I would also like to thank the honourable Prime Minister for his able leadership and wisdom in continuing to steer our nation forward.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish you and all honourable Members of this august House a very happy and blessed Christmas and a prosperous and meaningful New Year. *Vinaka saka*.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to address a matter of great concern to our communities and our national development - the threat posed by termites, as raised by the honourable Minister. I thank her for her Ministerial Statement.

As alluded to by the Minister, termites are social insects that flourish in warm and humid climate as ours. The most destructive species affecting Fiji is the Asian Subterranean Termite, first detected here in the early 2000. These insects live in vast colonies underground, silently attacking timber structures, crops and household furniture. Their destructive capacity has cost millions of dollars in damage, undermining homes, schools, and vital infrastructure across our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, infestation remains concentrated in the Western Division, but the report confirms the spread into the Central and Northern Divisions. The Ministry of Forestry has identified substandard treated timber in the domestic market as a major risk factor. Compounding this challenge is the lack of awareness in many communities where infestations are detected late, resulting in costly repairs and loss of property.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has strengthened the regulation on timber treatment to ensure that only properly treated timber is sold. I understand that public awareness campaigns are ongoing

to educate households on safe handling of chemicals and early detection methods. Safety protocols emphasise proper storage and application of chemicals, the use of protective and applying termiticides, and strict measures to prevent contamination of water sources and food supplies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the use of chemicals to protect timber and treat timber is one of the major actions that has been carried out by the Ministry of Forestry. I understand the Ministry of Forestry is working closely with suppliers, to ensure quality assurance and prevent the sale of diluted or unsafe products.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the way forward are as follows:

- Strong enforcement to crack down on illegal sale of untreated or substandard timber.
- Build community partnerships by training carpenters, builders, and households on termite safe practices.
- Invest in research innovation to explore eco-friendly alternatives, such as biological controls and resistant timber species.
- Encourage public vigilance, urging citizens to report infestations early to reduce the spread.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, termites are not merely a forestry issue - they are a national development challenge. I, therefore, ask that efforts and funding be elevated and improved. Protecting our homes, schools and livelihoods requires collective responsibility, strict regulation of timber treatment, safe chemical use and innovative solutions for the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to acknowledge honourable Kiran and honourable Tubuna, who initiated these projects on termites very early during the formation of this Parliament, and they have carried out substantial efforts in dealing with this issue. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Update on the Fiji Economy

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, Cabinet Ministers, Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition and Members of Parliament. I rise today not only to provide an update on the state of our economy, but more importantly to deliver a message of confidence, reassurance and hope for every Fijian family and business.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me begin with the development on the global front. The truth is, the world has faced turbulence, geopolitical tension, trade wars, supply chain disruptions and slowing demand in some economies. Yet, despite these challenges, the international outlook has stabilized, and momentum is returning. This is important for us because Fiji does not operate in isolation. When the world grows, Fiji benefits. The IMF latest world economic output released in October, revised global growth upwards to 3.2 percent for 2025 and 3.1 percent to 2026. This upward revision reflects stronger than expected performance in the advanced economies driven by targeted fiscal interventions, monetary easing improving trade flows. This is an encouraging signal for Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, given our strong linkages to global markets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, across our key trading partners, economic activity has shown resilience. The manufacturing and services sectors are rebounding while trade prospects remain firm. Even where some moderation has occurred, such as in New Zealand, our deep and enduring partnership ensures that Fiji's economic linkages remain strong and reliable. I must also highlight that in July 2025, the Trump Administration announced sweeping tariff changes affecting nearly 70 countries. Through careful and determined diplomacy, Fiji successfully secured a reduction in tariff trade from 32 percent down to 15 percent.

This is no small feat. It is evidence of the Coalition Government's credibility, determination and ability to protect Fiji's interest on the global stage. While some of our neighbours have faced steeper tariff increases, Fiji strong bilateral engagement and proactive diplomacy has placed us in a stronger position to navigate this new environment. This is a clear example of leadership making a difference.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government remains steadfast in its commitment to diversify Fiji's trade partnership, broaden our export markets and deepen regional integration initiatives to strengthen trade facilitation, upgrade infrastructure and build capacity for our exporters are all under way. We are laying the foundation for longer term resilience and opportunity.

Inflation has been a contentious topic not only at home but globally after the COVID-19 pandemic. I would like to state that global inflation is stabilizing now after a notable improvement in supply chain, softening commodity prices, coupled with decisive monetary policy action by central banks around the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, two crucial indicators for us as a net importing country. Brent crude oil prices have stabilised at around US\$65.07 per barrel in October 2025, from the peak of US\$124.4 per barrel in June 2022. The other is, global headline inflation, which is expected to fall to 4.2 percent in 2025 and 3.7 percent in 2026, from a historic high of 8.6 percent in 2022.

In summary, the global economy is showing signs of resilience and renewed momentum. For Fiji, this external stability presents opportunities to strengthen exports, attract investment, and sustain tourism arrivals, all critical to our continued growth and prosperity.

For Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to report that the outlook remains positive, resilient and full of opportunity. The Macro-Economic Committee has revised Fiji's GDP growth forecast for 2025 upward to 3.4 percent from the earlier estimate of 3.2 percent reflecting the strong year-to-date performance across our major economic sectors.

For 2026, growth is forecast at 3.0 percent, marking what will be our fifth consecutive year of expansion since emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. These results reinforce a simple truth. Under this Government's steady leadership, the fundamentals of our economy are strong, confidence is returning, and Fiji's economic future remains promising.

Following the June Budget announcement and the clear policy direction set by the Government, we are already witnessing a resurgence in economic activity. The confidence-building measures contained in the budget are generating optimism across the economy, from businesses to households, from farmers to investors.

Our labour market is improving. We have seen a reduction in resident departures, while foreign workers are arriving to support key industries, which shows growing confidence in local job opportunities. FNPF membership registration rose around by 2 percent in September 2025, compared to the same period last year, while total wages and salaries also rose by 9.4 percent in the year, signalling stronger job creation and income growth.

Tourism remains a cornerstone of our recovery. Visitor arrivals, cumulative to October, high by a marginal 0.1 percent compared to the same period last year. This is despite competitive global travel environment, hotel occupancy, tourism earnings, and broader industry performance all point to sustained strength. Beyond tourism, expansion is evident in electricity generation as well as in timber processing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government is committed to further develop tourism and other resource-based sectors through targeted support, investments, and partnership with industry stakeholders. We recognise that tourism is not just about numbers. It is about sustainable growth that benefits communities across the country and preserves our environment and showcases the unique Fijian spirit to the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we continue to see strong consumption activity driven by rising household income, increased remittance inflows, continued strength in tourism, and higher Government spending on key programmes and infrastructure. These factors are creating real benefits on the ground for Fijian families and businesses. Cumulative to October, new consumption-related loans, a leading indicator of consumption activity rose by 28.5 percent from the same period last year. Other latest partial indicators of consumption, such as net VAT collections increased by 0.5 percent and vehicle registration by 23.2 percent in the review period.

Investment activity is also gaining traction on the back of rising construction activity. Cumulative to June, value of work put in place rose by 12 percent on an annual basis. Some of the major projects currently under construction include tourism-related projects, upgrade to our airport infrastructure, housing developments, and major road improvements across the country. These projects not only create jobs but also lay a solid foundation for a sustained economic growth and improve quality of life in years to come. Our financial sector remains strong and well capitalised. Commercial banks have reported rising profitability amidst declining non-performing loans, while credit growth continues at a healthy 9.8 percent in October, with historical low interest rates fostering an environment conducive to business expansion and entrepreneurship.

The Reserve Bank of Fiji has maintained an accommodative monetary policy, which will provide further impetus to investment and growth. Liquidity level remains strong, standing at \$2.1 billion as at November, ensuring ample funds are available to meet the needs of our economy. Foreign reserves remain healthy as well, standing at around \$3.9 billion as at last week – sufficient to cover over 5.8 months of retained imports. This financial strength gives Fiji the flexibility and confidence to manage external shocks and sustain economic stability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am also pleased to report that inflation remains under control. Inflation has been in the negative for the tenth consecutive month in November. Year-on-year, headline inflation dropped to -1.4 percent in November, largely due to the reduction in VAT as well as subsidies on public transport. These measures have eased the cost of living for many Fijian families, helping put more money back into the household budgets. This encouraging trend reflects the success of Government measures, from social welfare increases to support for rural livelihoods and targeted policies to safeguard households. We are acutely aware that keeping everyday essentials affordable is critical to ensuring that all Fijians can enjoy a decent standard of living. The Coalition Government will continue to prioritise policies that protect consumers, especially our most vulnerable citizens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as mentioned earlier this week, Fiji Bureau of Statistics has recently released the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and GDP under the updated 2019 CPI base, which is based on the 2019-2020 HIES, highlighted notable shifts in consumer preferences, prompting structural changes in the food and non-alcoholic beverages, education, alcoholic beverages, tobacco and narcotics and communication strategy.

Let me share our fiscal performance for the fiscal year 2024 -2025. Government collected over \$4 billion in total revenue, both in tax and non-taxes. This is the first time we have crossed the \$4 billion mark in total revenue collections, setting a new fiscal milestone for Fiji. Similarly, tax collections stood at around \$3.5 billion, the highest collection ever and \$181.5 million above the budgeted forecast for the last fiscal year. The Government expenditure at the end of 2025 amounted

to around \$4.4 billion, lower by \$161.8 million, or 3.6 percent when compared to the original budgeted level.

Subsequently, given the above budget revenue collection and slightly lower expenditures, Government registered a fiscal deficit of around 2.5 percent of GDP, almost half of the budgeted deficit of 4.5 percent. This is the lowest fiscal deficit since 2016-2017. The debt-to-GDP ratio declined from 79 percent to 78.8 percent of GDP, underscoring progress in fiscal consolidation and a further improvement in debt sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are tracking well with the current year's budget. In the first quarter of the fiscal year, the Government recorded a net surplus of \$80.2 million, equivalent to 0.5 percent of GDP. Total revenues stood at \$1.2 billion, whilst total expenditure amounted to \$1.1 billion. In the same period last financial year, August to October 2024, the net surplus was \$127.7 million, equivalent to 0.9 percent of GDP.

The total revenue for the first three months of the fiscal year was above the forecast by \$73.4 million and represented around 28.3 percent of the budgeted revenue of around \$3.95 billion. This strong performance in overall government revenue was attributed to above-forecast collections of around \$41.3 million, or 4.9 percent in tax revenue, and \$32.1 million, or 15.1 percent in non-tax revenue. Compared to the same period last year, total revenue was higher by \$31.8 million. In terms of expenditure, total government spending for the first quarter amounted to \$1.03 billion, higher by \$79.3 million when compared to the same period last year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the outlook is positive, we must acknowledge that significant risks remain. We still have geopolitical tensions, including conflicts in the Middle East and ongoing instability in Eastern Europe, that continue to affect global markets and commodity prices. However, Fiji has built resilience through prudent fiscal management, diversified economic activities, and strategic partnerships. Our Government is actively monitoring these risks and will respond swiftly with targeted measures to protect our economy and safeguard the well-being of our people.

In closing, I want to express my confidence that Fiji's economic future is bright. Despite global uncertainties, our economy remains on a steady path of growth, driven by sound policies, strong institutions, and the unwavering spirit of our people. The Government will continue to lead with vision, determination and care. We will invest wisely, protect our citizens, and open doors to new opportunities that raise living standards and create lasting prosperity. With sound policy, structural reforms, and strong commitment to inclusive growth and resilience, we can transform this momentum into long-term prosperity for all Fijians.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I ask the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate to respond, honourable Members, please join me in warmly welcoming the students, teachers, and parents of Nasivikoso Village in the interior of Ba. You are most welcome.

On behalf of the honourable Members, I warmly welcome you to your Parliament. I hope that this visit will expand your understanding of how Parliament works and provide awareness of the important role Parliament plays in discerning and safeguarding our democracy. So once again, welcome to your Parliament, and thank you for joining us today.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in this Chamber today to respond to the honourable Minister for Finance, Commerce and Business Development with regards to his Ministerial Statement. The honourable Minister celebrates the projected growth of 3.4 percent for 2025 and forecast of 3.0 percent for 2026. While any growth is welcomed, this is not a victory lap. It is a slow walk that leaves the vast majority of Fijians behind.

This statement is a display of economic complacency that ignores the structural damage caused by the Government's regressive fiscal policies. We must look beyond the rosy pictures painted by the Minister and Ministry and acknowledge the realities facing our nation. The honourable Minister's pride in 3.4 percent growth projection is entirely misplaced when viewed against the requirements for sustainable national development.

The latest article from the International Monetary Fund repeatedly underscores the fact that Fiji's medium-term potential growth is expected to settle below the pre-pandemic trend of 3.3 percent. Our economy is fundamentally failing to accelerate. To generate the necessary jobs significantly reduces our high public debt, which remains elevated at around 80 percent of GDP. The finance and critical infrastructure upgrade needed; the nation requires sustained growth rate well above 6 percent. I request the honourable Minister not to follow suit of his previous Minister who used to say a few sentences and leave few sentences. Sir, IMF has said that we need more than 6 percent growth a year to sustain our National Development Plan.

Close to around \$3 billion in three years is not a very good fiscal policy especially when current policies do not show any trend to sustain this heavy borrowing by this Government. The current projected rate of 3.4 percent and 3 percent are barely keeping pace with our challenges. They do not build the fiscal buffers that IMF recommends, nor do they offer the policy space to cope with future shocks. The Government is managing a slow recovery, not creating a foundation for prosperity. What we handed them was the fifth fastest growing economy in the world which was based on tourism.

Having talked about tourism, Mr. Speaker, a structural reform, not just tourism-led recovery are what the IMF calls to raise potential growth. The honourable Minister failed to articulate the decisive plan to achieve this elevated and necessary growth rate. I thought as Minister of Finance, he would talk about the recent Bill, Commercial Use of Marine Areas Bill 2025 that was introduced by honourable Deputy Prime Minister. We all know it is just a fancy title. Is it not the same as the *iQoliqoli* Bill that will have a detrimental effect on the tourism industry?

The honourable Deputy Prime Minister said that there is a process but eventually the Bill will be transferred either today or tomorrow. Ownership will change eventually. Will this bring in investment or hold the investment? Instead of transferring the ownership, we should set up a formal structure that hotel and resort pay a fixed amount to the ancestral *iqoliqoli* owners. This will help investor confidence and at the same time help the *iqoliqoli* owners as well. The state should administer this to be fair on all parties and sustain investment in future. As an example, Mr. Speaker, the extraction of mineral and resources from State land. A certain percentage goes to the Ministry of Mineral Resources which is then passed onto the ancestral *iqoliqoli* owners. Same kind of structure should be placed. All the rivers that are crossing State land, the levy of 25 percent is actually going to the ancestral *iqoliqoli* owners.

Corporate tax hikes and fuelling of the black economy. The decision to increase corporate income tax rate from 20 percent to 25 percent was a deeply flawed measure that will be economically destructive in the long term. By dramatically increasing the cost of compliance and formality, the Government has handed over a powerful incentive to business, particularly SMEs to move their operations underground. This feeds the black economy. We now have the black economy in Fiji, substantially estimated to be between \$8 million to \$1 billion annually representing massive loss revenue.

The simplest logic of public finance dictates the higher tax rate especially without proportional improvement, Public Service increasing the temptation and motivation of tax evasion and under-reporting of income.

The VAT hike and stagnant PAYE threshold, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are shift from spending to savings. The Minister boasted that the consumption has been blossoming, but this is disingenuous. The reality on the ground is that the purchasing power of the average Fijian has been crippled by this Government's tax policy combinations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the stagnant PAYE threshold, compounded with this regressive consumption tax, is a stagnation of PAYE tax free threshold at \$30,000 for far too long. With the cost of living and inflation rising, even if the overall inflation figure is temporarily tipped, the stagnant threshold means that workers earning just over the minimal amount are paying an effective rate that is disproportionately burdensome. This, together with the recent increase in the civil servants' pay, has just surpassed the \$30,000 threshold, thus increasing the burden of PAYE.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, the honourable Minister's Statement is a testament to economic short-sightedness and policies made on an *ad hoc* basis. It acknowledges the economic growth rate that falls far short of what Fiji needs to sustain development. It ignores the fact that Ministry's tax policies are actively expanding the black economy and simultaneously reducing the purchasing power of ordinary Fijians.

The people of Fiji are struggling, not celebrating, and this Government must urgently reverse the harmful tax decision and implement a bold, pro-growth agenda that meets IMF challenges and secures a prosperous future for all.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank you, honourable Members. This brings us to the end of Ministerial Statements, and it is also a convenient time for our break.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 12.47 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.35 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before we proceed on to the next Item on our Agenda, I would like you to, please, join me in warmly welcoming the students, parents and teachers of Soloira District School in Naitasiri.

(Acclamation)

On behalf of all Members, I warmly welcome you to your Parliament. I hope this visit will expand your understanding on how your Parliament works and provides significant awareness on the vital role Parliament plays in upholding democracy. Once again, welcome to Parliament and thank you for joining us today.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Progress on the Civil Aviation Bill (Question No. 338/2025)

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation update Parliament on the progress of drafting the new Civil Aviation Bill?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the question raised by the honourable Member. Before I do so, allow me to pay tribute to two organisations I visited over the last few days.

The first was on Friday last week - the Expo for Early Release, organised by the Commissioner of Corrections, my *Turaga Naita*, Mr. Naucukidi, at Korovou. This was a truly illuminating visit, Mr. Speaker, Sir, where our inmates have been trained in some very useful skills. They came with nothing, and they are leaving the institution with something valuable, and I commend the Commissioner of Corrections and his Team for this effort.

It is quite impressive, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that recidivism is now down to 0.58 percent. Such is the effect or the way people have been given their second chance and being supported through the initiatives within the Corrections Service. I salute Commissioner Naucukidi and his Team for a job well done.

Also yesterday, I went to the prize giving ceremony at Ratu Navula College. As you know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this was started by Ratu Napolioni Dawai at that time, the vision that he had to start a school for Nadi. It now has a role of more than 1,000 students and is one of the leading institutions now in the area of Nadi.

I was sharing with my colleagues in caucus today that when they came out to receive their prizes, I was impressed with the presentation - their attire, the way they presented themselves, and I later found, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that a lot of them from TVET, on the day they finished their courses, they were snapped up by companies around Nadi. So, Ratu Navula College had to plead with the employers to release them to come to the function. It was quite impressive, so there is truth in the adage - there is dignity in work. I think TVET is doing a wonderful job in that area, and I had

shared that with the honourable Minister today, commending him of the focus on TVET in education.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I will give you a brief background on the work that has been conducted by my team on the Civil Aviation Bill. As you are aware, our aviation sector is a key enabler for economic growth in Fiji, and while we continue to strengthen connectivity within the Pacific, we have an obligation to international standards set by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO).

In October this year, Cabinet endorsed the review of Fiji's three primary civil aviation laws, namely:

- (1) Civil Aviation Act 1976;
- (2) Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji Act 1979; and
- (3) Civil Aviation Reform Act 1999.

These Acts, drafted decades ago for a very different aviation environment, no longer adequately support modern safety, regulatory and operational requirements. The Civil Aviation Act is now 49 years old, the Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji Act is 46 years old, and the Civil Aviation Reform Act is 26 years old.

This work will culminate in a new civil aviation Bill, which will repeal and replace the existing Acts with a single modern piece of legislation. The new Bill is designed to provide a comprehensive legal framework for both, aviation safety and economic regulation, ensuring Fiji's civil aviation system is equipped to meet current and emerging sector demands.

The development of this Bill responds directly to the findings of the 2019 ICAO audit, which highlighted significant gaps arising from the age of the current legislation. Consolidating the three Acts into one will remove duplication, strengthen clarity and better align Fiji's civil aviation system with international best practice.

The Bill will also enable harmonisation of subsidiary regulations, including alignment of the New Zealand Civil Aviation Rules (CARs), which represent a well-established and internationally recognised regulatory model.

To ensure the Bill is robust and fit for purpose, a comparative analysis was undertaken with the civil aviation legislation of New Zealand, Singapore and Papua New Guinea. The most relevant and effective provisions from these jurisdictions have been incorporated and adapted to Fiji's legal and operational context.

Following this review, the draft Civil Aviation Bill 2026 is now in its public consultation phase. The key objectives of the draft Bill include:

- (1) compliance with ICAO standards, focusing on safety;
- (2) consolidation and efficiency, having in place a single cohesive framework and eliminating possible legal duplication; and
- (3) strengthening legal authority to ensure alignment with international standards and best practice.

The Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation, in collaboration with Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji, will be conducting consultations from 8th December, 2025 to 12th December, 2025. This will start in Suva, followed by Nadi, then Labasa, and conclude in Savusavu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this time to invite the public to attend these consultations, to ensure comprehensive input and transparency across the nation. I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Minister, thank you for the update on the progress of the drafting of the new Civil Aviation Bill. Because we are ensuring that we comply with all the ICAO standards, et cetera, it is generally a three-tiered approach with respect to any civil aviation laws and rules. One, is obviously the law; there is the Air Navigation Regulations; and also the Standards Document which accompany everything together.

My question is, whilst you are doing the law, and because the regulation is dated back to 1981, will you be amending, or have you also started looking at the amendments that are required in the Air Navigation Regulations and the Standards Document?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Yes. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are doing all that. As I have said, it will all be one. Right now, there are three different parts, and the whole exercise is consolidating all those - the regulations, the orders, et cetera. It will be about 70 pages altogether. A little bit similar to the exercise by the Ministry of Education, where they had a lot of separate Acts that became one, similarly, we will see it in Civil Aviation, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Thank you.

Meeting in Bangladesh - Labour Recruitment
(Question No. 347/2025)

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I ask the question, first, I would like to thank you for the Christmas gift – a *Tanoa*. It means a lot to me, Sir. I also thank, Madam, so whenever we will have a mix while in Ba, it will remind me of the discussions and the events held in Barbados. *Vinakwa*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question is:

Can the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry update Parliament on the outcomes of the meeting in Bangladesh, particularly regarding the recruitment of labour to address labour shortage in Fiji's sugar industry?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Member for his question, and I wish to, first, bring two very important good news to this august House.

First, Mr. Speaker Sir, the United Kingdom has officially confirmed that it will maintain the UK global tariff and increase the raw sugar import quota by 65,000 tonnes from 1st January, 2026. Fiji will continue to enjoy the duty-free access under the UK-Pacific Economic Partnership Agreement for the next eight years. This is a major diplomatic and trade victory for Fiji, and a clear vote of confidence in our sugar industry.

Second, after the rigorous testing and trials of the Rarawai Mill, the Mill will resume crushing from tomorrow, 5th December, 2025. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a strong signal that our rehabilitation efforts are delivering results, and that this Government is getting the industry moving again.

I will now respond to the honourable Member's question. This question raises a critical issue, the shortage of reliable labour in the sugar industry. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has made every effort to mobilise labour locally, however, time and time again, our growers have been left vulnerable, and in this case, a number of labourers do not fulfil their obligation and leave before the harvesting season concludes.

It is important to note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that this challenge is not unique in the sugar industry. Almost every sector in Fiji, particularly agriculture, construction and hospitality, is facing similar workforce shortages. In agriculture, the challenge is even more pronounced, as entry-level positions attract minimal wages and work is physically demanding.

This situation has been compounded by an ongoing migration of our people to Australia and New Zealand under the seasonal employment schemes. This is also part of a global trend where developed economies are drawing workers from developing nations, leaving critical industries, like sugar, short of skilled and reliable labour.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2023 Report, there is a long-term global decline in agricultural employment, driven by a shrinking rural population and migration of younger generation to cities or overseas. The Report also highlights that many countries are struggling to attract and retain workers for physically demanding low-paid seasonal agricultural jobs. Fiji is not alone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, labour shortage in agriculture is not unique in Fiji - it is a global crisis affecting both, developed and developing economies. Canada currently faces a shortage of over 87,000 farm workers, projected to exceed 100,000 by 2030. In the United States, the deficit is estimated 2.4 million agricultural workers by next year. In Chile, the industry reports a shortfall of 300,000 workers in each harvest season, risking the loss of up to a quarter of the nation's crops. Across the European Union, more than 2.5 million workers have resisted agriculture over the past decade, with only 11.9 percent of farm managers now under the age of 40 years. These figures clearly demonstrate that agriculture worldwide is facing severe labour shortage pressures. Fiji's own labour challenges must, therefore, be understood within the broader global context and addressed through targeted, innovative, and forward-looking solutions.

While we are not replacing our local workforce, it has become clear that we must complement it strategically to reduce the burden on farmers. Our collaboration with the Fiji Corrections Service has provided some relief, but it remains insufficient to meet the overall labour demand across all the Mill areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sugar industry is facing:

- a severe and escalating labour shortage that affects every stage of production, from farmland preparation, planting, harvesting, and delivery.
- Growers are struggling with local labour that is increasingly inconsistent, costly, and often sourced from distant communities.
- Limited mechanisation, particularly in the hilly and difficult terrain where many of our cane farms are situated.
- Harvesting gangs are unable to secure sufficient workers, in some instances, leading to abandoned or delayed harvesting, and significant financial losses to the growers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this labour crisis poses a direct threat to farm production and long-term sustainability to our growers. In this context, the Government has begun exploring a Government-to-Government (G2G) labour cooperation model with Bangladesh. My Ministry is currently developing a framework, under our bilateral arrangement, which we will submit to Cabinet for consideration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recent visit undertaken by myself, my Permanent Secretary and the CEO of the Sugar Cane Grower's Council, was both, timely and highly productive, providing valuable insights into how this model can strengthen labour availability for our industry.

During the mission, we had the opportunity to:

- visit the Bangladeshi sugar industry;
- engage directly with sugarcane farmers;
- observe first-hand availability, discipline and production of Bangladeshi labour across various agricultural operations;
- hold a formal discussion with the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment on the labour cooperation; and
- visit one of their labour upskilling certification institutions which was gaining valuable insights on how they prepare their workers for deployment overseas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government of Bangladesh has expressed a strong genuine willingness to support with a structured supply of labour, particularly for agriculture and the sugar industry. Their readiness, professionalism and well-organised deployment system were clearly evident during our engagements. They view this cooperation not merely as a labour partnership, but as part of a broader commitment to deepen and strengthen the long-standing bilateral relation between our two nations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to emphasise that this concept has already demonstrated practical success on the ground. A small pilot group of eight Bangladeshi workers, engaged through my private company, are currently assisting farms in Labasa. These workers have displayed exceptional work ethics, discipline and reliability. Their contribution has improved not only the productivity of my farm, but also supports several neighbouring farms, where growers also observe greater consistency, efficiency and timely completion of the field operations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are now developing a dedicated Labour Recruitment Model specifically tailored for the needs of the sugar industry. This model is carefully designed to:

- complement, not replace, our local workforce;
- provide growers with a stable, consistent, and reliable pool of labour, particularly during peak harvesting periods when shortages are most severe; and
- ensure strict adherence to all Fiji's labour, immigration, and welfare laws with safeguards to protect both workers and growers.

The proposed recruitment model will be administered through by the Sugar Cane Growers Council, in close partnership with the Ministry for Employment, Ministry for Multi-Ethnic Affairs, and the Sugar Industry. This arrangement is particularly suited to our larger growers who require a consistent and dependable labour supply. To safeguard all parties, the model will operate under a formal MOU - vetted and approved by the Ministry for Employment - with ongoing coordination involving the Ministries of Immigration and Sugar Industry to ensure compliance, transparency, and effective implementation.

During the upcoming off-season, we will also explore the establishment of a second pilot labour model specifically designed for small and medium-sized growers. Under this initiative, we intend to utilise one of FSC's accommodation facilities, either at Rakiraki or Ba, to house approximately 20 seasonal foreign labourers.

With the support of FSC and the Sugar Cane Growers Council, a work roster will be developed to assist local farmers who require help with spraying, planting, weeding, and other farm operations during the off-season. Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the crushing season, these workers will be organised into two manual harvesting gangs to support growers facing labour shortages. At present, harvesting assistance through the Fiji Corrections Service is costly and requires substantial investment in risk mitigation and mobilisation protocols for the deployment of inmates. The pilot

model aims to provide a more practical, consistent, and cost-effective alternative for our growers.

The reality before us is clear: if Fiji's sugar industry is to remain viable and competitive, it must evolve. A structured, well-regulated, and ethically managed migrant labour programme is no longer a choice—it is now a necessity brought about by persistent deepening labour shortages. We have both the mandate and the responsibility to act. Our approach must protect growers from rising labour pressures, safeguard workers' welfare, and secure long-term sustainability of the industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our engagement with the Government of Bangladesh has been highly encouraging. It marks a significant step towards addressing one of the biggest industry challenges. The proposed G2G labour model provides a structured, transparent and compliant system that will ensure growers have access to reliable labour.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first I would like to thank the honourable Minister for the announcement that Rarawai Mill will start operating from tomorrow. There is still a lot of cane that is standing to be harvested. Supplementary question, has there been any consultation with sugarcane farmers, especially the cost of this recruitment initiative, how it will be shared between Government, FSC, or the cane farmers?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you know, we have been moving around the country and many farmers have been asking about how we can we bring in Bangladeshi workers.

The model that I implemented in Labasa works very well, and it is something we are trying to explain to the farmers that this is how you need to recruit, keep the workers in a good place where they can live properly and not be treated like slaves. Those things were told to the farmers, and that is why, as I said earlier, we are trying to put smaller models in Viti Levu with smaller farms, and let us see if the farmers accept it, well and good.

HON. A.A MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, just a clarification from the honourable Minister. When we bring in these workers, are we paying them on tonnage or are we paying them on hourly rate because it had been an issue previously. When some of the workers get paid on tonnage, they do not reach the minimum wage rate that is actually assigned by the Ministry of Employment, that is, \$5.50 per hour because it all depends on how many people are cutting cane and how many tonnage is harvested within an hour. What is the proposal going forward especially bringing workers from outside, if we start paying them on hourly rate, how are we going to compensate the current sugar cane cutters or what is the proposal that the Ministry might have in order to ensure that we have a level playing field?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, when I recruited the workers from Bangladesh the minimum wage rate was \$2.80 per hour. Today the minimum wage rate is \$5 but I am paying them \$5.50 an hour. Now, the reason being, they are not only working just by simply cane cutting. They are working six days a week and once cane cutting is not there, they go and work on other farms doing vegetable farming, et cetera. If you multiply \$5 by eight hours, it comes to \$40 a day. If you want to harvest cane by using simple labour in Fiji, you have to pay \$35 per tonne. These gentlemen have come from overseas, they need to save money. They have to send money back to their home country. Your answer in short is, we pay them by hour, and we are not trying to tell them to compete with the normal farmer, but as you see, in this season even the local farmers started demanding \$40 an hour per tonne. Yes, we are paying them \$5.50, and we will maintain it.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, labour shortage is a real challenge faced by farmers now. We also see the decline in cane production with the report from FSC. Honourable Minister, is there any time frame or timeline when we can start getting labourers from Bangladesh?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will give the offer to the farmers for them to agree and the sooner they agree, the sooner we can start recruiting.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before we do that, I should explain for the sake of transparency that the *tanoa* that honourable Pillay had referred to I gifted him, it was a promise I made to him whilst I was watching them share a bowl of grog with the honourable Minister for Education in Barbados. I told him, I will get you a *tanoa* when we get home. So, you have it today.

Honourable Members, please take note that Oral Question No. 348/2025 has dropped from the Order Paper as it has been addressed through the Ministerial Statement by the Minister for Finance on Thursday, 27th November, 2025.

(Oral Question No. 348/2025 dropped from Order Paper)

Construction of Waimari Bridge - Rakiraki
(Question No. 349/2025)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport inform Parliament if there are plans to construct Waimari Bridge in Rakiraki which was destroyed during *TC Winston*?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I advise this House that the survey and design process is currently underway for the construction of Waimari Bridge. This work is being undertaken by the Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) as part of its Bridge Replacement Programme. Once the design phase is completed, the project will be included for budget consideration in the upcoming financial year, ensuring that funding is allocation for the project.

The Government recognises the critical importance of this bridge in connecting rural communities to essential services such as schools, health facilities and markets. The planned works will incorporate climate resilient design standards to extend future extreme weather events and improve safety for all users. In addition, FRA will engage with landowners and stakeholders during the implementation phase to ensure smooth delivery and timely completion.

Moving forward, the Ministry will continue to monitor progress closely and provide updates. The restoration of the Waimari Bridge is a priority under our Infrastructure Resilience Programme and also in terms of reconnecting communities and supporting socio-economic development in the area and the province of Ra. The FRA has made notable progress on road and bridge upgrades in Ra province. Key works include rehabilitation and resurfacing along King's Road corridor with rip and remake upgrades, improving durability, quality and safety. In Drauniivi, approximately 220 metres of road surface has been upgraded, enhancing connectivity for residents and businesses. These improvements are part of the broader national effort in terms of infrastructure resilience.

Major bridge projects have been completed under the Critical Bridges Programme, including Yaqara, Tavualevu, Korovou. These climate-resilient structures improve safety, reduce travel time and support economic activities. Collectively, these works form part of the Fiji Transport Infrastructure Restoration Project, which includes upgrades to nine critical bridges and over 1.5 billion square metres of road surface nationwide. The Fiji Roads Authority has also upgraded the first 270 metres of Waimari Road from town end early this year. The upgrade includes a new footpath, improved drainage and improved road surface in front of the businesses and residents

within the Rakiraki Town boundary along Waimari Road.

The Ministry continues to work closely with stakeholders and especially development partners to accelerate delivery to ensure modern, safe and sustainable transport. I recognise that, of course, this is not enough, which is why, as I already mentioned, that we continue to reassess the programmes as we move forward in the budget year. Even also further discussions with the Ministry of Finance on flexibility in terms of budget programme options. There will be situations where we face, in terms of emergencies as we are in the cyclone season.

For fast-track repairs, there is also the situation of upgrading approaches to crossings, which we are currently undertaking, assessing and re-prioritising. And, of course, I have mentioned the formulation of national roads, bridges and crossings plans currently being looked into with the assistance of our development partners. This will form a comprehensive roadmap forward for the next 20 year to 30 years as far as bridges and roads are concerned, divided into the main trunk routes and the rural roads and bridges. In relation to that, the financing strategy and plans moving forward are currently being discussed and networked with our development partners.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question, this bridge will give access to students in a school nearby. Because this bridge is damaged, the students in the area have to take a longer route. My humble request to the honourable Minister is, if this could be done before the next school year. Is there any timeframe by when this bridge will be done, Sir?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have already explained the plans, in terms of the survey design process, and we will include it in the next financial year. Definitely, we will relook at that to see what measures can be taken to alleviate the situation before the start of the school year.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Honourable Minister, thank you for the continuation of construction of roads and bridges. Still in the interior of Ra and linking Naitasiri, the road from Nukulau to Roma, what is the progress on that bridge, honourable Minister?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- As I have already alluded to, some of these bridges and crossings are part of the current assessment. We as a Government want to do things to satisfy the demands which are out there, but that is also part of the current works being done in terms of moving forward. The specific update, I will need to get from the Fiji Roads Authority, but from what I have gathered, that is part of our current process in terms of design and specifications.

Dental Outreach Programme in Maritime Islands
(Question No. 350/2025)

HON. K.V. RAVU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services update Parliament on the outcome of the recent Dental Outreach Programme in the maritime islands?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I thank honourable Ravu for his question. Before I answer his question, I would just like to take this opportunity to congratulate you, Sir, on your role as the Chancellor of the University of Fiji. I believe I was the first one to speak this morning and I was planning to congratulate you, but I forgot – this is an opportune time. Congratulations once again. I also congratulate my part-time *kai*, honourable Naivalurua, who is confirmed as an Honorary Colonel in the RFMF. Thank you very much.

Traditionally, dental services in maritime areas have been limited to school-based visits and living adults and other vulnerable groups without access to this essential care. In recognising this gap, the Ministry schedules targeted outreach visits to ensure equitable access for all. As I speak, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Subdivisional Medical Officer in Lomaiviti and this team, together with members of the Eastern Health Division, are touring the Lomaiviti Group. The dental team is also part of that effort, so Lomaiviti is covered there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you will allow me to share the two major outreach visits completed last month in Yasayasa Moala and Vanuabalavu. In Yasayasa Moala Outreach, from 15th October to 8th November, this team focussed on the conservative treatment across Matuku, Totoya and Moala. While the goal was restorative care, many teeth were beyond saving, requiring extractions. Key achievements were:

- 244 patients examined and treated (93 adults and 151 children);
- 337 treatments delivered, including:
- 184 extractions;
- 63 conservative restorations (composite, glass ionomer, and amalgam); and
- 90 preventative treatments (fluoride application and scaling).

Of the 244 patients examined:

- 93 patients received multiple treatments;
- 36 patients deferred due to high blood pressure or elevated blood sugar;
- 4 cases with rheumatic heart disease had their teeth managed during this outreach, making patients referred to CWM Hospital for oral surgery or root canal therapy.

The team also visited six primary schools and one secondary school conducting oral health education sessions on hygiene and oral cancer. Collaboration extended beyond dentistry, nurses, doctors, and even the Ministry of Fisheries supported logistics, ensuring a holistic approach.

The Outreach to Vanuabalavu was held on 23rd October to 13th November, 2025. This second team delivered specialised prosthetic services, restoring smiles and confidence for those who had lost their teeth. That was Phase 2 of a structured programme, following preparatory work in May and June of this year as Phase 1. Key achievements:

- 103 patients were scheduled for Vanuabalavu and surrounding islands;
- 68 full dentures (38 upper and 31 lower) and 104 partial dentures (57 upper, 47 lower) inserted;
- services were free for 61 social welfare recipients, while 42 paid partial or full fees.

A follow-up team will return next week for Phase 3ee to review patients and make necessary adjustments. Those are the updates from the recent trips, as asked by honourable Ravu.

Land for PRB Nabua Tenants
(Question No. 351/2025)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government update Parliament whether the Ministry has identified land for the Public Rental Board Nabua tenants who were given 100-days eviction notice?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. Before I respond to the question, first I would like to give a bit of background on the case at the Public Rental Board, Mead Road Estate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the remaining six blocks of the Public Rental Board, Mead Road Estate which accommodates 144 households or tenants have been certified by engineers to be structurally unsafe, as most of these buildings have been there for over 50 years, and the board have conducted two consultations to-date with the tenants raising awareness on the safety of the structures. They also conducted socio-economic status to ascertain as well as determine the financial status of all their tenants, also to assist them in providing alternative housing solutions that are available to them. The Public Rental Board has been fully and also actively engaging with all the affected tenants to ensure that all those tenants are adequately supported and housed.

The Board has also provided a comprehensive relocation plan to address the needs of all those affected families. To-date, seven tenants have been successfully relocated to the Housing Assistance and Relief Trust, commonly known as HART and another four families have applied for available lots as well as homes through the Housing Authority.

A total of nine families or households have chosen to return and also be relocated to their respective villages and, additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, 14 families have been relocated to other Public Rental Board flats within the Suva area. For the remaining tenants, the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs as well as the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development are providing ongoing support and assistance to facilitate the transition and ensure that no family is left without shelter.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to assure the remaining tenants that the Ministry of Housing is working closely with the Public Rental Board in the relocation of remaining tenants and the Ministry has in the process identified two greenfield land allocated at Koronivia in Nausori as well as a piece of land at Veivauceva in Tacirua, Suva which will also be used to assist in the relocation process. The Ministry has also been allocated a budget of \$2.2 million on the acquisition as well as development of this land, and hopefully we can also relocate some of these affected tenants to this particular land that has been identified. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- A supplementary question; honourable Minister, for those who have opted to return to their villages, what form of assistance is available for them?

HON. M. NALUMISA.- I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for that very good question. The Board is now working on a budget of \$200,000, to assist them in their relocation. As I have alluded to earlier, we are also working with the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, as well as the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development, to try and relocate those who have opted to move to their villages. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

State Schedule A Land and State Schedule B Land
(Question No. 352/2025)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources update Parliament on the total number of leases under the State Schedule A land (SSA) and State Schedule B land (SSB) Tenureship and the status of verification?

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the State holds two types of land in trust for the indigenous landowners - Schedule A and Schedule B Land. Schedule A is land that once

belonged to a landowning unit that has become extinct. Schedule B is land that was not claimed during the initial sittings of the then Native Land Commission, in the early part of the 1900s.

Since the inception of the return of these land project in the early 2000, the total number of leases identified under SSA and SSAB is 3,500. Within Schedule A and Schedule B leases, 3,500 leases sit within it. Sir, 3,100 has been verified and has been transmitted to the iTaukei Land Trust Board (iTLTB). The balance of 400, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to be completed within the 2025-2026 financial year.

It is important, Mr. Speaker, to note that the active leases identified, as I had spoken about before, 3,100 of them, are transmitted by the Director of Lands to the iTLTB and they are also notified of the expired leases for renewal as per their own procedures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all the survey fieldwork, for example, for those land which have, unfortunately, had double tenure, 40 of them have been identified. These are parcels of land that have been leased by the State, and at the same time, also leased by iTLTB. Those 40 have been identified, and they have been completed in the last financial year (2024-2025). The Ministry is in the final stages of the process and completing the lease administration part of all parcels of surveyed land, which is also anticipated to be completed in the next financial year.

Challenges identified in this project, as I have identified before, double tenure leases, and this requires the engagement of the iTaukei Lands and Fisheries Commission (iTLFC) with our surveyors to properly demarcate the boundaries. This has been collaboratively achieved between the Ministry surveyors and the surveyors from the iTLFC.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Honourable Minister, you did mention that a few of these land are still under leases, either with iTLTB or the State itself. Given that Schedule A land and the landowning unit has become extinct, and the other is unclaimed land, or the lease money, where does it go to when it goes to, I suppose, iTLTB?

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- My apologies, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I did not get the early part of the question.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Honourable Minister, you did mention that some 40 or so are still on double tenureship between iTLTB and the State. Where does the lease money fall into when the payments are done, given that Schedule A is extinct, Schedule B is unclaimed?

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the first part of the question, for double-tenure leases that have been identified and there are 40 of them all located in Vanua Levu, they are organised in a way where iTLTB has been asked to collect those leases – SSA and SSAB. So iTLTB collects the leases whilst we are administratively closing the lease that they have with the State so that the one that has been issued by iTLTB, is the one that governs their contractual relationship between them and the lessees. iTLTB, of course, will administer it.

MR. SPEAKER.- For the next Oral Question, Question No. 353/2025, the Minister for Finance is not here, so we will wait for his return.

Honourable Members, please, take note Oral Question No. 354/2025 has dropped from the Order Paper, as it had been addressed through the Ministerial Statement by the Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts, this morning.

Ministry of Immigration's Services Across Fiji
(Question No. 355/2025)

HON. R.R. SHARMA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Immigration update Parliament on the expansion of the Ministry's services across Fiji?

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, for now, the expansion of the services to Fijians is done through our outreach programmes. We try and attend major events. We attended Galoa Village; Malake Sevens in Rakiraki; the Yalovata Sevens in Levuka, Ovalau; we were at the HFC Stadium in Suva; Savusavu; Ratu Ganilau House; we attended when they had the Retirement Expo at the FNPF Plaza in Suva, Retirement Expo in Nadi, Beqa, and even to Rotuma.

Here in Suva, we are currently located here at Robertson Road. We have an office in Nadi, in Lautoka at Rogorogovuda House and they are going to move down to 10 Mana Street. It is a much bigger space. It has been fitted out right now. Hopefully, we can move there next year. We have Savusavu and Labasa Offices.

We have scoped Nakasi. Given the densely populated area over there, they do not have to come all the way to Suva. It is a bit difficult to find space for an Immigration Office because we prefer ground floor with enough space to seat, at least, 50 people so that they can be comfortable while we are serving them.

If I may just add, I know the question is just around Fiji, but we extend services to our diaspora community. During the Fiji Day celebrations, we went to Australia Northern Territory, Robinvale in Brisbane, Melbourne in Sydney, Port Hedland and Perth; in New Zealand - Auckland and Wellington, we even went to the Cook Islands, Tuvalu, Samoa, and Tonga, where we offered our services to the diaspora there.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I would like to thank the honourable Minister for Immigration for his efforts. I have a question which was, in fact, sent to me just now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, looking at the media release by his Permanent Secretary, it stated that on 1st December, 2025, the daily appointment slots on the online passport application portal will be increased. Then this citizen sends me screenshots of December with no slots, January with no slots, and furthermore, February with no slots to book for an appointment. He also stated that when he makes phone calls and sends emails, they go unanswered. Can I urge the honourable Minister to look into this matter and update Parliament on when this can be solved?

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we try our best to offer services to our people. We have extended the opening hours in Suva from 8.30 a.m. to 5.00 p.m., to allow people to lodge applications. There is an increase in demand during this festive season, which is why we extended those hours.

The portal, it was 30, it is now 120. The reason why we ask people to book online so that they can come in and sit in the space that is provided. If they just walk in, and as you know where we are in Suva, there is no space for them to shelter from the rain and sun. It is right at Nina Street. We have increased it to 120 for now, and we have extended the opening hours for the Suva Office from 8.30 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. That is in place right now.

MR. SPEAKER. - Before we move on to the next question, honourable Members, please,

join me in warmly welcoming the students, teachers and parents of Nalagi Public School in Nadroga.

(Acclamation)

On behalf of the honourable Members of Parliament, I warmly welcome you to your Parliament, and I hope that this visit will expand your understanding of how Parliament works and provide significant awareness of the vital role that Parliament plays in upholding democracy. Once again, welcome to your Parliament, and thank you for joining us today.

Airborne Geophysical Survey
(Question No. 356/2025)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources update Parliament on the Airborne Geophysical Survey that the Ministry is currently pursuing in collaboration with Geoscience Australia?

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker. I am happy to close off the question session for the year by providing an update on these very exciting signs that is currently happening in our country.

The Airborne Electromagnetic Geophysical Survey is presently being conducted around the dry parts of Fiji. It is an advanced non-invasive method of mapping the Earth's subsurface. This advanced geophysical survey technology will collect real-time data from the air with the use of a huge helicopter flying at a height of between 80 to 100 metres above the earth and, in addition, towing a very large coil-shaped sensor that sends electromagnetic waves into the ground.

As this helicopter and its machine flies over, the equipment will receive and record returned electromagnetic waves to provide detailed information about the subsurface, indicating potential underground water sources, without the need for any widespread ground-based survey.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a very bold and transformative move towards modernizing how Fiji assesses and manages its water resources. Government, through the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources, in partnership with Geoscience Australia, has made this initiative possible with the support of the Australian Government, reinforcing our Vuvale Partnership between Fiji and Australia.

The survey began in June this year and has just been completed on the 14th of this month. It covered areas of Viti Levu, Vanua Levu and Taveuni. The flight paths were strategically designed based on four key areas:

- (1) red zones for water carting;
- (2) drier regions where groundwater requests are common,
- (3) areas not serviced by Water Authority of Fiji; and
- (4) the coastal communities with significant risk to saline intrusion and contamination.

Mr, Speaker, Sir, this criterion ensures that the survey prioritizes the most vulnerable and underserved communities, aligning with our commitment to providing equitable water access to all our citizens. This project will enhance our knowledge on how we manage one of the most vital resources that we have - groundwater. It allows us to map groundwater resources to depth of approximately 300 metres below ground, significantly enhancing our ability to better manage the

resource.

Once data is collected, Mr. Speaker, the data collection is concluded, it will undergo six weeks of quality assurance and quality control, and that is going to be done by Xcalibur, a global leader in airborne geophysical surveying with extensive experience in delivering high-resolution subsurface data for minerals, energy and water resource exploration.

This then will be followed by an addition of two months of data interpretation and that is going to be done by Geoscience Australia before the final data set is released to the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources. This initiative will ensure that every Fijian, no matter how remote their community, has reliable access to clean and safe water where groundwater potential is available.

Through this survey, the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources aims to build a robust database of groundwater that can be accessed by Water Authority of Fiji and all other Ministries who would want to have access to this information.

Mr. Speaker, better groundwater data means better and accurate borehole placements, more resilient infrastructure and, ultimately, fewer communities going without water during dry seasons or periods of drought. It ensures that every Fijian, no matter how remote, should have access to clean water, safe and sustainable water for their livelihood.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his update on this survey that is being carried out. A quick question, honourable Minister, from what you have answered, it would seem that it is only water specific. Is there data being collected with respect to other minerals and resources that may become part of our maps, et cetera? I understand the way it is done; it can actually collect data for purposes of mineral exploration, et cetera.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the mandate or the agreement that we had with Geoscience Australia is that the technology would serve and identify where groundwater sources would be located around the areas. The technology, obviously, has the capacity to identify mineralisation, but I am not sure if that was something that we would also get out of the dataset that is going to be presented to us by Geoscience. The priority of the exercise only goes into search for underground water.

HON. V. NATH.- Honourable Minister, the Airborne Geographical Survey is a very powerful tool. We understand that it can be very well utilised in the disaster risk reduction. How are you going to utilise it, and are we using our local students to do this?

MR. SPEAKER.- Can you explain much more slowly and clearly the question, please?

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, I thank honourable Minister for his deliberation. However, knowing that, honourable Minister, that this is a powerful tool, can that be used for disaster risk reduction, as well as for training our students?

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, I will attempt to answer the supplementary question. What we are getting out of this geophysical survey is a set of data. How we interpret the data and how we want to use the data will be totally up to us.

I mentioned when I made my answer to the question is, we have identified areas, and we had four criteria where we want to have boreholes constructed. We set ourselves how to do that, but what we have always done over the years is we put men on the ground, and they would walk for kilometres on end in trying to identify, at least, one water source. The work that we normally would do in two

weeks, that machine is able to do within two hours.

Once we get that dataset, then we will be able to then map out where are the priority areas and where in the graphs there is a lot of groundwater identified. We are able to put placements on boreholes in say, A, B and C areas. So, that is really the intention behind this. Obviously, everyone that is going to be involved in the borehole construction and in the reticulation process are all going to be local.

MR. SPEAKER.- We will now go back to Oral Question No. 353/2025 from honourable Maharaj. If you will just bear with me, the Secretary-General and the Secretariat have quickly checked the record in the *Daily Hansard*, and Question No. 353/2025, as it appears here, had been answered by another question in our October Sitting, although not in the same form or not in the same question. The issue is that Question No. 353/2025 should have been dropped for that reason, unless you wish to pursue it further in another question for another time.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir I do not mind raising another question at a later stage, provided we are given six questions instead of five. If I would had gone ahead with this question, then the Opposition would have had five questions; now it is down four.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think it is a matter for the Business Committee to look at. I am not at liberty to decide here, but we will look at it sympathetically since it has found its ways into our brief. We will look at your issue that way.

Written Questions

2025 Tourism Arrivals and Fiji Tourism Policy 2025-2035 (Question No. 345/2025)

HON. RATU. J.B. NIUDAMU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation update Parliament with respect to the following:

- (a) Fiji's tourism arrival figures in 2025 to date including a breakdown of major source markets and;
- (b) What strategies are being implemented to sustain growth and diversify markets in line with the Fiji Tourism Policy 2025- 2035?

¹ HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am happy to table the response.

Pilot Tourism Small and Micro Enterprises Fund (Question No. 346/2025)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation update Parliament on the progress of the Pilot Tourism Small and Micro Enterprise (MSE) Fund with respect to the following:

¹ Editor's Note: Reply to Written Question No. 345/2025 tabled by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation, under Standing Order 45(3), is appended as Annexure I.

- (a) How many businesses have been selected;
- (b) How are financial assistance, training and marketing support provided; and
- (c) How does the programme contribute to the Government's goal of fostering growth in the tourism sector?

² HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the response is here, I will table it now.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please, take note that we have eight Bills to deal with today. The first Bill will be for second reading, six Bills will be for third reading, and the final Bill will be moved under Standing Order 51.

RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES BILL 2025

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 85(1), I move:

That the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Bill 2025 (Bill No. 37/2025), be now read a second time.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I invite the mover of the motion to speak on this Bill, I remind the honourable Members that in accordance with Standing Order 85(1), the debate will focus on the principles and merits only of the Bill.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise with a deep sense of duty and hope as this Bill is a landmark step for Fiji. It seeks to recognise, protect and promote the right of indigenous peoples in line with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). In doing so, it fulfils both our international commitments and our national responsibility to strengthen the *iTaukei* administration system in this modern era.

This Bill reflects the vision of our forefathers when our high chiefs signed the Deed of Cession in 1875. They did so, on the understanding that the rights of the *iTaukei* especially the native land ownership, would be protected. History shows that this commitment has guided Fiji ever since. Leaders like Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna carried that legacy forward. His leadership led to the formation of the Native (now *iTaukei*) Land Trust Board in 1940, established to protect land for future generations while enabling sustainable national development. We honour the chiefs and state men who safeguard our land, identity and culture. Their wisdom creates the foundation on which this Bill stands, and today we continue the legacy into a new era.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, UNDRIP was adopted in 2007 with Fiji as co-sponsor and co-author of the declaration. Though not legally binding, it sets a clear global standard for recognising and protecting indigenous rights. In 2023, the Government publicly committed to fully align Fiji with UNDRIP to safeguard the rights of our indigenous people. Pursuing this required domestic legislation, this Bill provide the legal framework.

The Bill affirms the right of *iTaukei* but it also recognises other indigenous communities acknowledged in our Constitution, most notably the Rotumans and Banaban peoples. For clarity, the definition of *iTaukei* remains exactly as defined in the *iTaukei* Affairs Act 1944. This includes indigenous Fijians by lineage in persons of Melanesian, Polynesian or Micronesian descendants who

² Editor's Note: Reply to Written Question No. 346/2025 tabled by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation, under Standing Order 45(3), is appended as Annexure II.

reside in *iTaukei* villages. These definitions have generated discussions, and we expect further dialogue during the development of the National Action Plan (NAP). This discussion must be transparent, respectful and inclusive.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bill has several key goals:

- Affirm UNDRIP as part of Fiji's domestic law, make it a principle, a guiding standard for Fiji;
- Promote self-determination and well-being so indigenous people can chart their own development with dignity;
- Eliminate violence, racism and discrimination against indigenous people, including systematic discrimination;
- Promote mutual respect and cultural understanding among all Fijians through human rights, education and public awareness;
- Establish monitoring and accountability measures so their rights are implemented, not just stated;
- Protect indigenous cultures, language, tradition and heritage; and
- Review all existing laws that affect indigenous interests, especially those inherited from colonial times.

Each objective forms part of the comprehensive agenda to strengthen cultural pride, improve institutions, combat discrimination and modernise outdated systems. The Bill does not only state principles, but it also requires action.

Clause 4 reaffirms UNDRIP and obligates the Minister for iTaukei Affairs to develop a National Action Plan to implement it.

Clause 5 specifies what the action plan must contain. It will:

- address injustices and prejudice;
- eliminate violence and discrimination;
- promote respect, understanding and human rights education; and
- establish monitoring, oversight and accountability measures.

The action plan will be a living, practical roadmap for implementing indigenous rights across all sectors, developed through nationwide consultations with communities.

Clause 6 requires that the action plan be completed within 12 months of the Act coming into force.

Clause 7 requires the finished plan to be tabled in Parliament within 14 sitting days of its completion and then be made public.

Clause 8 requires an annual report submitted within 90 days after each fiscal year describing progress, actions taken and areas requiring improvement.

Clause 9 ensures each report is tabled in Parliament and reviewed by the appropriate committee. This creates a strong accountability cycle every year. Parliament and the public will have full visibility of implementation.

Mr. Speaker, one of the most transformative parts of this Bill is its requirement to review outdated laws that still govern *iTaukei* life. Many of these laws were passed as Colonial Ordinances:

- iTaukei Lands Act 1905;
- Fisheries Act 1941;
- Native Land Trust Act 1940; and
- iTaukei Affairs Act 1944.

These laws protected indigenous land and identity, but some provisions no longer meet today's needs. They may unintentionally limit opportunities or create administrative barriers. The Bill mandates a systematic review to identify which laws need updating or replacing. This does not discard their protective intent; it strengthens them, so they remain relevant and empowering in the modern economy. This review process supports the wider reform of the iTaukei administration, including the revitalisation of the Great Council of Chiefs, the strengthening of the iTaukei Lands and Fisheries Commission, the iTaukei Land Trust Board and other institutions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during drafting, the Ministry consulted the iTaukei Affairs Board and the reconstituted Great Council of Chiefs. Their feedback helped shape a Bill grounded in the real needs of our people. Further public consultations are expected when the Bill goes to the Standing Committee. Once enacted, the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts will lead the development of the NAP.

Consultations will involve village leaders, provincial councils, women, youth and elders across Fiji, ensuring the plan reflects grassroots voice. It will also include other stakeholders who may be affected by these developments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill is a milestone for Fiji. It addresses three important things:

- align Fiji with global standards, help create through UNDRIP;
- modernise the *iTaukei* administration, updating old systems and strengthening indigenous institutions;
- create a structured, accountable national approach, moving from *ad hoc* practice to a systematic plan with regular oversight.

In practical terms, this means:

- the landowning units will have a clearer pathway to benefit from their lands;
- indigenous women and youth will have a stronger voice in decision-making;
- indigenous communities will know their rights and are part of a national agenda reviewed every year by Parliament; and
- all citizens will benefit from improved social harmony and respect between cultural groups.

An empowered indigenous community strengthens the whole nation. Fiji succeeds when its first people thrives culturally, economically and socially.

Before I conclude, I acknowledge all leaders, past and present, who paved the way for this moment. The passage of this Bill is not the end, it is the beginning. The true test will be implementation. I am confident we will meet that challenge through continued partnership and political will.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Bill 2025 is visionary yet practical. It strengthens rights, prevents abuses, modernises the outdated system and unlocks opportunities for our people. It reminds us that we can honour tradition while embracing progress. By supporting this Bill, we declare that Fiji is ready to move beyond the constraints of the colonial era system and build a future where indigenous rights and national development advance hand in hand. I commend the Bill to the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I open the floor for debate on the motion, I have a list of speakers with me. I would like now to take the time to suspend the proceedings for a break, but, before that, I will entertain a suspension motion for the purposes of complying with Standing Orders with respect to sitting times.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

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

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have the current Bill before us, and there are others, which you have indicated to the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion, if any.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- I do not have any further comments, Mr. Speaker.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 4.05 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.40 p.m.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'S BILL 2025

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Culture and Heritage and Arts has already moved his motion which is before the House and spoken on. I have a list of speakers, and at the end of the debate, we will have the right of reply from the mover.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs for introducing the Bill. I am not a lawyer, and I do not have any experience in the legal aspect of the Bill. What I intend to do is basically introduce some subjects that I think, as a “bush lawyer,” will give the honourable Minister some ammunition during the discussions and consultations on the Bill.

I understand that honourable Members in Government may interject, but I think they should understand that I am not a legal expert. I have just basically read the Bill and will introduce some notes that I thought were suitable. While the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Bill 2025 is well-intentioned, aiming to align Fiji with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, it raises serious concerns about practicality, coherence, and the balance of rights with our constitutional framework.

Firstly, the Bill is creating legal uncertainty. Articles such as Article 32, which require free, prior, and informed consent before any development project affecting indigenous lands or resources, could paralyse national development. Infrastructure, energy and resource projects are vital to Fiji's economy and could be delayed or blocked entirely - not because they are unjust, but because the consultation process is undefined and potentially unworkable.

While UNDRIP emphasises consultations, it does not mandate an absolute veto. Yet the Bill, as drafted, risks being interpreted as granting indigenous communities a veto power over State decisions, undermining the principle of parliamentary sovereignty.

Secondly, the Bill may inadvertently create inequality among citizens. Article 2 of the Bill affirms freedom from discrimination, yet many provisions grant rights exclusively to indigenous people that are not equally available to other Fijians. For example, Articles 33 to 35 allows indigenous communities to determine identity, membership and responsibility of individuals which could conflict with the universal rights guaranteed under Articles 1 and 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), that all persons are equal in dignity and rights. By embedding collective rights that apply only to one group, the Bill risks undermining the principle of equality before the law.

Third, the Bill introduces parallel legal and institutional system. Article 34 recognises indigenous judicial system alongside State law. While cultural autonomy is important, this could fragment Fiji's legal order, creating uncertainty about which laws apply in disputes. Sir, UDHR emphasises the universality of rights and the rule of law, introducing separate systems, risking inconsistency and unequal protection.

Fourth, the Bills financial and administrative obligations is heavy. Article 39 requires states to provide financial and technical assistance while Article 38 obliges legislative measures to achieve the declaration's terms. These commitments, though noble, may strain Fiji's limited resources. Without clear prioritisation, the Bill is becoming aspirational rather than achievable, raising expectations that cannot be met.

Finally, Article 46 itself acknowledges that tensioned rights must not impair the territorial integrity of political unity of sovereign states. Yet by embedding strong self-determination provisions - Articles 3 to 5, 32 and 37, the Bill risks encouraging separatist interpretations. This could destabilise Fiji's delicate multiracial balance where unity must be preserved alongside diversity.

In conclusion, while the Bill seeks to honour indigenous heritage and align with UNDRIP, it risks legal fragmentation, economic paralysis, unequal treatment and unrealistic obligations. The UDHR reminds us that rights must be universal, equal and balanced with the needs of a democratic society. This Bill in its current form threatens that balance. Mr. Speaker, Sir, to protect both indigenous rights and national unity, we must either substantially amend this Bill or reject it outright.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, honourable Members, I thank you for the opportunity to address this House on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples' Bill; a Bill of national importance and long-term constitutional significance.

The introduction of this Bill marks a significant step towards aligning our national laws with international standards, strengthening the dignity and rights of the indigenous people, affirming the principles of equality and inclusion that lie at the heart of our democracy. The Bill seeks to give domestic effect to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) or the UN Declaration.

The UNDRIP is an international human rights instrument adopted overwhelmingly by the United Nations General Assembly in 2007. It is the most comprehensive international instrument on the rights of indigenous people. It establishes a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity, and the well-being of indigenous people, and elaborate on the existing human rights standards and fundamental freedom as they apply to indigenous people.

What I would like to do now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to reply to what honourable Koroilavesau had said. What are the misconceptions about UNDRIP? The first misconception is this. The UNDRIP creates new special rights for indigenous people. The reality, the declaration does not invent new human rights. Instead, it affirms and applies existing, long-established universal human rights or norms like self-determination and non-discrimination to the specific, historical, cultural, and material context of indigenous people.

Another misconception is, UNDRIP is an enforceable, merely aspirational document. The reality is this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the Declaration is a non-binding UN General Assembly resolution and not a legally enforceable treaty in itself, it carries significant moral and political weight, especially for this Government. It principally reflects international consensus and serves as a vital guide for States to adopt into international laws and policies.

Another misconception, the principle of free prior and informed consent gives indigenous people an absolute veto over resource development. This is the reality, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is a crucial right that requires States to obtain the consent of indigenous people before moving forward with projects that affect their land or rights. For too long, since Independence, Mr. Speaker, the informed prior rights of landowners or resource owners have not been, and for the first time, we hope that this Bill will provide that platform for them to be consulted.

Mr. Speaker, the Bill does not alter constitutional land protections. It does not diminish the rights of any other community. It strengthens our collective commitment to fairness, equality and human dignity. It does not grant indigenous *iTaukei* groups a right of veto over development, as many on the other side would like to say. It does not transfer ownership of land or resources. On the contrary, Mr. Speaker, the Bill's emphasis on self-determination and the well-being of

indigenous peoples, which underscores the Coalition Government's collective commitment to fostering an environment where indigenous communities can thrive, preserve their cultural heritage, and participate fully in national development. The Bill also actively seeks to combat prejudice, violence, racism and discrimination, promoting mutual respect and understanding through targeted human rights education. The establishment of a comprehensive action plan with clear measures for accountability, monitoring and review ensures that these objectives are not only aspirational but achievable, with mechanisms in place for continuous improvement.

Furthermore, the Bill recognises the importance of equitable sharing of resources and benefits derived from natural resources, ensuring that indigenous people are active participants in economic activities affecting their lands and culture. The inclusion of funding provisions, regular reporting, and public transparency demonstrates a commitment to accountability and inclusiveness. By empowering advisory bodies, setting regulations, and safeguarding indigenous cultural, linguistic, and land rights, this legislation exemplifies a holistic approach to justice and reconciliation.

Mr. Speaker, Fiji is not alone in domesticating UNDRIP principles. Canada passed the UNDRIP Act 2021, which requires its government to align all federal laws with UNDRIP and produce a national implementation plan. Canada has integrated UNDRIP principles into environmental and resource legislation, without disrupting the constitutional framework.

In New Zealand Mr. Speaker, Sir, it incorporates UNDRIP principles through the Treaty of Waitangi settlement process, national strategies, and judicial interpretation. The UNDRIP supports Maori participation in decision-making; it does not rewrite the Constitution.

In Australia, although not yet legislated at federal level, UNDRIP informs indigenous policies, environmental approvals, and cultural heritage protection.

Mr. Speaker, before I take my seat, let me clarify that this Bill does not take away anyone's right. It does not disturb private ownership and does not dilute equal citizenship. What it does is ensure that Fiji's indigenous people, who hold a special place in our national identity are treated with dignity and fairness, as recognised by the international community. This aligns Fiji with international human rights standards. It strengthens the social fabric of our nation. It supports national healing and unity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this forward-looking Bill is a legal instrument of fairness, consultation and respect. By passing this legislation, the august House affirms our commitment to human rights, our recognition to indigenous identity and culture, and our confidence in a unified and inclusive Fiji. I commend the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Bill to the House.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in support of the Bill on the protection of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of Fiji. I speak from the perspective of tourism. For the information of the House, the World Travel and Tourism Council and its forecast for the future growth of tourism, have identified indigenous tourism as a driver of tourism in the years to come. The indigenous people are not playing a big role right now in the tourism equation, but that will change. It is changing and will change. To protect the integrity of the indigenous people, we need to protect their rights.

For Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all know the contribution of tourism to our economy, it is now 42 percent. As I have said it in the past, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is still confined to only two provinces - Nadroga/Navosa and Ba. That is about 80 percent of the tourism. We have a policy now with a sustainable framework to spread tourism across the archipelago.

For that to happen, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the *iTaukei* community and culture, what is unique about us, has to be protected at all costs. We have seen what it does for our country, and we know what makes Fiji the way it is. If you ask our visitors, why do you choose Fiji -

- Is it because of our beaches?
- Is it because of our modern airline?
- Is it because of our hotels and transportation systems?

No, it is you, the people. We come to Fiji because of you, the people. So, we need to ensure that the integrity of what makes us special is protected always. And this is one way, I believe it is a significant way of ensuring that we continue to remain as a unique people with a culture, with traditions that are special to many people and make tourism what it is.

From us in the tourism sector, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we welcome this Bill. We welcome the protection of the indigenous rights. As you know, in other jurisdictions, the indigenous community have been pushed aside. They are no longer of consequence. It is because there was no protection for them. For this protection that we will enact, it is for everyone's benefit. We know who controls tourism in terms of the commercial aspect of it, the investors and the developers. They are the ones who will benefit the most knowing that the investment is secure, that we keep the integrity of what makes Fiji special, and that is, Sir, a large part is due to the indigenous community. This is something we need to do, something we have to put into law, to protect what makes us special going forward.

With those comments, I support this Bill on what it means to tourism and to the economy of the country.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk on the Bill; the Bill on Indigenous Rights and the Promotion of the Rights of Indigenous People. I will just try to look very briefly at the issues around the principles and the merits of this particular Bill.

I think the major principle of this Bill is self-apparent from the name of the Bill, which is the declaration on the rights of indigenous people. In fact, it is spelled out more in the objectives, when you look at the objectives of the Bill, it gives that very strong focus and understanding of what it is all about. So, the whole principle is about the idea of the universal human rights. I do not think anyone ever has an argument with the idea of human rights. We all have that human rights need to be upheld and UNDRIP is, of course, a UN declaration that countries can sign up to.

To a large extent, this particular declaration, I think the honourable Acting Attorney-General was quoting the examples of New Zealand and Canada. The difference between those countries and Fiji, in those countries, the indigenous are a very small, downtrodden minority, whereas Fiji is the exact opposite. I think if you look at it in terms of the context in which the declaration is done, it was probably done to protect those that were really downtrodden, small numbers, et cetera.

Now, in Fiji we, the *iTaukei*, are the majority, we do have our land (91 percent of the land), we are the majority in Parliament, we are the majority in Cabinet, we are the majority in decision making and that is the way that it will be forever and ever because population dynamics are such. I think when you are looking at all of these, you also need to look into the context within which that declaration was put into place. It was put into place primarily for the small indigenous communities whose rights have been trampled upon.

We, in Fiji, are one of the blessed countries in the world because for us, *iTaukei* we do have our land, we do have our rights, we have a lot of these things. So, sometimes I shudder to think, are we trying to scapegoat and blame someone else for our ills?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- I am not accusing anyone. I am just saying sometimes we can think in that way. So, it is very important to understand the context in which it was done. I am not against it, but it is important to see the difference in the context.

In Fiji, we the *iTaukei* are in control and the population dynamics are such that it will be that way into the future. There is a strong focus on the declaration and one of the other things to note and there is nothing wrong with this, there is nothing wrong with duplicating the rights that are already in the Constitution. There are a lot of things here that are already protected to some extent in the Constitution, but some of the things in this Bill go beyond that. They go beyond some of the things that are in the Constitution. I can later on look at some of the things.

First of all, for me, the principle is the Declaration of the Rights of the Indigenous People who are the majority in this country. Secondly, one of the principles that I see, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that we are trying to blend the rights established under the Constitution with what is coming out of this particular Bill, and I think this will be an interesting exercise to get into.

As we look at the Articles of the Bill, I will give you some examples. For instance, at Article 3, in this principle of trying to blend things together, it says, and I quote: "Indigenous have the right to self-determination." By virtue of that right, they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development. There is nothing wrong with that, but freely, does that mean outside the ambit of the limits that are provided constitutionally or legally? I am talking about how we are going to blend this. It is a blended approach to what is in here and what is already in the legislation.

The second one is in Article 4, indigenous peoples in exercising their right to self-determination, have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to the internal and local affairs; that is okay. We have provincial councils, we have our *Bose Vanua*, et cetera, as well as a way and means for financing their autonomous functions. It is important then, that when this is applied, the details do not impinge on any other government structures that are established in Fiji. That will also be a blending exercise that we need to do.

For Article 5, Mr. Speaker, indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions, while retaining their right to participate fully, if they so choose, in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the state. I am not too sure that, that impinges too much, but there could be, in the interpretation of the words, there could be some sort of cross-blending with the limitations that are already provided constitutionally.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Of course, one of the things about this particular Bill, it does not establish, you have the right to do this, you do not have the right to do this. It says, you write an action plan. Whoever comes in then decides what goes into that action plan. And when they put in their action plan, it depends on how they choose to interpret these things that I am talking about. It can be not open-ended, but that is a challenge there. Like normal legislation, it is defined - everything here, action plan. The action plan will depend on the point of view of the people coming in to do that.

Article 14, indigenous people have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions, providing education in their own language. I am just thinking myself, is this going to impinge on our education system as is, or not? As you can see the way I am thinking

about these things. It could be because, as I said, Mr. Speaker, what will be done, will depend on the action plan.

The action plan is not specified here. Someone could come up and say, “this means we will set up separate schools according to the action plan.” No, but you will not be here forever. You will not be here forever. I might not be here next parliament. But the thing is, when we write laws, we write laws to make sure that they last for a long time. As we are looking at the different laws, we look at the pros and cons. If you just looked at something like this and you just see the black, you have not seen the green too. You have got to look at it in totality because we are lawmakers, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We have got to look at that in totality.

The thing I am glad about, Mr. Speaker, is that it will go to Committee. I am just sharing some of the thoughts that I am having at the moment on this.

In Article 18, indigenous people have the right to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, as well as to maintain and develop their own indigenous decision-making institutions. The question would be, would that be related just to themselves, *Bose Vanua*, *Bose ni Koro*, *Bose ni Yavusa*, or does it come into our decision-making institutions that we have here? That is one of the issues that I am grappling with.

The other one is Article 26 which is an interesting one. Indigenous peoples have the right to lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned. Wow! What does that mean for State land? If you go back 200 years?

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Let me finish my thoughts, honourable Acting Attorney-General. When you say, “traditionally owned”, are you talking about according to the way that it is currently in the Constitution or if you go back 200 years - what does that mean? That is my point. Traditionally owned, occupied, or otherwise. How does that end?

The Constitution as it is right now, Mr. Speaker, does not allow you to change the classification of land. If it is freehold land, it will be freehold land. This would then allow you, someone could use this and weaponise it to say, “take out all the freehold land.” I am saying could, could – think! Open your minds. Remember, we are here to do laws for the long term. It could be done. Why? Because in this Bill it talks about an action plan. What you put in that action plan depends on the people making that plan. You get my drift? You better open it up.

That, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are some of the concerns that I have in terms of the principles. In terms of the merits, there are some new rights that are coming into this Bill. I think some are duplicating the Constitution – the cultural recognition, the equality and the non-discrimination. New things that seem to be coming through in this Bill that are not in the Constitution is self-determination and the full resource of benefit sharing, and the legislative review powers.

The other thing that might be coming in is, of course, the genetic resource rights, which I think is a good thing. If people are using things that are coming from our genetic makeup, then the people who are giving those genes should share the benefits of it, as well as the broad resource benefit sharing. These are all new things that are coming out, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

At the end of it, Mr. Speaker, Sir, looking at the analysis of this whole Bill, there are a number of things in the Bill that are already provided by the Constitution – cultural identity and recognition

is in the preamble, protection from discrimination is there; ownership and protection of *iTaukei* land is in the Constitution; royalties for resource extraction is there in the Constitution; and language rights are there in the Constitution.

There are some areas that go beyond what is in the Constitution. These are some things that we have to grapple with – self-determination; free, prior and informed consent - how that affects other things need to be looked at; genetic and cultural resource rights, which I think is a good thing; broad benefit sharing rights beyond royalties; the UNDRIP integration into domestic law; and there are other things that could be some conflicts that I am not too sure, what might be the issue of equal citizenry. What do we mean by equal citizenry? That is an interesting question to ponder.

Constitution emphasises equal rights for all Fijians, but it also recognises the special place of *iTaukei*, the Banabans and Rotumans. Those are the three groups of people. Does the Bill then elevate the rights of one group over the others? These are just hypothetical questions, I am not saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’, it is something that the Committee will have to ponder about.

Secondly, equality before the law. Are there any issues about equality before the law not being maintained?

Thirdly, the Bill appears to expand indigenous claims to resources and make conflict with State ownership. There might be regulations that would affect land and customs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was listening to the honourable Attorney-General, and he was talking about the fact that this is not going to hamper development. However, development and the way that development takes place is not only dependent on what is black and white. A lot of it depends on how people feel about something.

We may say for us *iTaukei*, “Oh, this is okay”, but other people will see it in a different way. The way that they see it, the perception of it, could then impact how well our country grows, or maybe their confidence in investment, et cetera. These are all the considerations that we have to take into account. Our country has become what it is because we all contributed. Our forefathers contributed and brought us to this place.

As this Bill goes in, I welcome the fact that it is going to a Committee. I hope that it is going to my Committee, but I do not know which Committee it is, but I think there is a lot of interesting questions that are brought up that we will need to reflect on as we look into this Bill.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to Bill No. 37 of 2025. May I seek your permission, if I can speak in the *iTaukei* vernacular for the benefit of the *iTaukei*, who are the benefits of this Bill.

Turaga saka na Sipika, au tucake saka me’u vakaraitaka na noqu tokona vakaukauwa na Lawa Tu 37/20225, me baleta na noda dodonu na i taukei ni vanua, ka vakatokai vaka-Peretania na “Rights of Indigenous Peoples Bill”.

Na Lawa Vakaturu saka ogo e sega walega ni vakatakilakilataki kina na noda vanua ka vutuniyau tu ena i tovo, na kena i tukuni ena noda bula vaka-iTaukei, ka uma kina na noda qele, ia na Lawa Tu saka talega ogo, e dua na i kabakaba titobu ena kena rawati na noda liutaki vakadodonu ka vakasavasava na Kawa i Taukei.

Turaga saka na Sipika, sa vakayabaki mai na noda vakatawana tu na noda qele kei na kena i yau bula, ia na noda dodonu vakaitaukei ni vanua e vaka me dau laurai beci tu ka laurai sobu, e

sega soti ni dau vakabibitaki ena so saka na matanitu era sa veiliutaki oti yani.

Keimami dau veiqatitaki, tukuni vei keimami kei ira na neimami Turaga Bale mera la'i gunu waiburu e ruku ni vunimaqo. Segi ni keimami rogoci na neimami nanuma ena vuku ni lawa eso e tarai keimami na kawa iTaukei, me vaka na Bill No. 17 of 2021. E bokoci saka na nodra matabose na neimami Turaga Bale ka kalawaci na neimami tikotiko vakavanua se vakoro, oka kina na neimami uma qele.

Turaga saka na Sipika, na siga saka nikua e dua na siga guiguilecavi dredre vei keimami na kawa iTaukei, ni sa na vakarau vakalawataki vakamalua yani na neimami dodonu na kawa tamata na iTaukei ni vanua oqo. Esa na vakadromuci kina e dua na matanisiga ka dau veikalawaci, ka viavialevu na nodra bula na dau veiliutaki vei keimami na kawa iTaukei.

Turaga saka na Sipika, na Lawa Vakaturu saka oqo ena vakavuna e vica saka na ka:

- (1) Me na rogoci ka rokovi tale na iTaukei ena vanua e solia vei keimami na neimami Kalou bula.*
- (2) Sa na rokovi na neimami dodonu ena neimami taukena na neimami qele, qoliqoli kei na kena yau talei.*
- (3) Maroroi na neimami tovo kei na neimami tiko vakavanua.*
- (4) Rokovi na neimami vuku vakavanua (indigenous knowledge) kei na neimami vosa.*

Na Lawa Vakaturu saka oqo e solia e dua na kaukauwa levu vei keimami na kawa iTaukei, me keimami maroroya na veika e baleti keimami ena vuku ni yau keimami taukena kei na kena uma qele, ka na veivuke vei keimami ena neimami veiqati ena buturara ni bisinisi rabailevu sa tu e Viti e daidai.

Turaga saka na Sipika, na Lawa Vakaturu oqo e vakamura vakavinaka tu na lawatu ni dodonu ni Taukei e vuravura, ka vakatokai vaka-Peretania me United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous People, ka vakaqacotaka na veitokoni ni matanitu cokovata ena kena tokoni na dodonu ni tamata tabu saka yani.

Turaga saka na Sipika, na pasitaki saka ni lawa oqo e vakatakilakilataka na nodra dokai na iTaukei, ni ra matai ni kawa tamata era butuka na vanua vakaturaga o Viti - the first people, ka sa i tekitekivu talega na kena tarai na yavu ni nodra maroroi na iTaukei ka rokovi na nodra dodonu vaka-itaukei ni vanua ka na vakavuna talega na bula vinaka nei Viti ena veisiga ni mataka.

Era sa na maroroi saka na kawa iTaukei ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Era sa maroroi tu.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- ... kei ira na luve i keimami ena veisiga ni mataka.

Ni vakarorogo saka tiko mai na lewenivanua vakaturaga, tinikava na Yasana ena noda vanua, esa na sega tale ni na qai vakayacori vei keda na veivakalolomataki ka vakayacori ena tinikaono na yabaki sa oti, ka ra veitokoni kina e vica na Lewe ni Bose Lawa era dabe saka tiko ena vanua au vosa saka tiko yani kina oqo.

Ena vica saka na mala ni vosa saka oya, Turaga saka na Sipika, au sa tokona saka na lawa Vakaturu. 37 ni 2025, sa veivosakitaki saka tiko ena loma ni Vale ni Bose Lawa. Ena vica saka na mala ni vosa saka oya, au sa vakavinavinaka saka vakalevu. Vinaka.

[HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to strongly support Bill No. 37 of 2025 concerning the rights of the iTaukei people, referred to in English as the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples Bill.

This proposed law not only highlights our land, which is rich in culture and traditions, and embedded in our iTaukei way of life including our land ownership, but it also represents a significant step in securing rightful and dignified leadership for the iTaukei people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for many years we have safeguarded our land and its resources, yet our indigenous rights have often been disregarded and diminished. They have not always been prioritised by past governments. We have been challenged, told by our chiefs to drink water under the shade of the mango tree, and our voices have not been heard in laws that directly affect us, such as Bill No. 17 of 2021. Our chiefly councils were abolished, and our traditional seats and villages, including our land ownership, were undermined.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today is a difficult day for us as iTaukei. Our rights as indigenous people of this land are about to be legally recognised. This marks a new dawn, ending years of marginalisation and disregard by those who governed us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this proposed law will bring several outcomes:

- (1) The iTaukei will be heard and respected in the land given to us by our living God.
- (2) Our rights to our land, fishing grounds, and natural resources will be protected.
- (3) Our customs and traditional way of life will be preserved.
- (4) Our indigenous knowledge and language will be respected.

This proposed law grants significant authority to the iTaukei, enabling us to safeguard our resources and land, and to strengthen our position in the competitive business environment in Fiji today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill aligns well with the international law on indigenous rights, known as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It reinforces the support of the United Nations in protecting sacred human rights.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the passing of this Bill would signify respect for the iTaukei, the first people to inhabit Fiji, and establishes the foundation for protecting their rights. It will also contribute to the prosperity of Fiji in the days ahead. The iTaukei will be protected...

HON. J. USAMATE.- They are already protected.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- ...along with our children in the future. As the traditional leaders across the 14 Provinces listen, they will ensure that the injustices of the past 16 years, supported by some members of the legislature, will not be repeated. With these few words, Mr Speaker, Sir, I support the proposed Bill No. 37 of 2025 currently being debated in Parliament and I sincerely thank you.]

MR. SPEAKER.- I hate to remind Members that you have every right to interject, but when

it goes beyond interjection and you are interrupting the Speaker, that is when I come in. You can interject, I accept that, but not so much as to go interrupt that we cannot make any sense of what the speaker is saying.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Members who have already contributed to the Bill before us in terms of the recognition of the rights of indigenous people. I will try to put the discussion in some frame of context, and speak in both, vernacular and English language.

I think when we are looking at this Bill, it is very important that we go back in history in terms of our constitutional development. The honourable Leader of the Opposition had spoken about the truth and reconciliation and the need for us to be truthful. I believe that he will also be part of that mission of being truthful very soon.

If we look back, beginning from independence in 1970, where we formulated the Constitution and came into effect when we had the elections in 1972, 1977, and moving forward, and there was another Constitution in 1992. Of course, the government at that time led by the honourable Prime Minister now, formulated the Constitutional Review Commission which approved the 1997 Constitution.

We had the upheavals of the year 2000 which, if we look back, we would say formed or established some of the foundations of instability, moving into the year 2006, given that the major players were still there and some of the sentiments, et cetera, were expressed in the lead up to the 2006 *coup* and the removal of the SDL Government in 2006.

Moving forward a bit, there was a Constitution Review Commission but as we know, the Yash Ghai Draft was not formulated, so there was another Constitution which is the Constitution we are now running under, the 2013 Constitution.

Basically, what I am saying is the current 2013 Constitution Legal Framework which this Government is working on reviewing, which we will be proceeding with this afternoon where we have the Referendum Bill, that was part of a consequence of the interpretation of the provisions on the amendment to the Constitution. That is part of this Government, moving forward, in reviewing the 2013 Constitution because it is an imposed constitution, as we all know, and the Government is trying to rectify that.

When we had the 2014 Election and the 2022 Election, it was under the 2013 Constitution. What I would like to express here today was that the FijiFirst Government was operating under an ideology which, I would say, totally contrary or inconsistent or in opposition to what we are discussing today - the UNDRIP.

When we were in Opposition, that is what we were expressing all the time. Ideology is something that is all encompassing. You can use ideology to dominate the population, to brainwash them, and to tell them that this is the best way forward for the country and we have seen that in the history of nations. The end result of that or some of that ideology has resulted in conflict, wars, et cetera, whether it is communism, fascism or whatever.

What I am saying is the 2013 Constitution is an imposed Constitution which aligns with a specific ideology, and that ideology is expressed in cultural autonomy analysis by the former Attorney-General in the FijiFirst Government. I know that some of you have read it - *Cultural Autonomy: Its Implications for the Nation-State*. So, if you read this Bill, it is an element of cultural autonomy which is opposed by this ideology which was dominated or governed by the last

Government, the FijiFirst Government.

Let me read some of the conclusions of this ideology, the cultural autonomy and its implications. What he is saying is that cultural autonomy which is things like what we are discussing - the Great Council of Chiefs are elements of cultural autonomy which should be done away with. The domination or the all-encompassing power of the State. As honourable Usamate mentioned, the term 'common citizenship'. I know it is in the Bill, but it was an element which was repeatedly mentioned during the last government to nullify the cultural autonomy or cultural identity.

One example, when we were in Opposition, there was a report on Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES), and we had asked that ethnic data be included in it, but the last Government did not ask or did not ensure that it was included in it. That is something which, if you look at the basic framework of operations or the collection of statistics, the validity of statistics includes elements such as ethnic data, gender, et cetera. This is an example of what I am saying. When such an ideology dominates, it removes that kind of valid data, and if you remove it, it creates a misleading picture of the situation.

That is why it is very, very important that we move to the next step, away from the ideology of the last Government, which is reflected in the 2013 Constitution. It is also reflected in some of the utterances of honourable Members from the other side.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I speak in the vernacular.

Na ka ga au via vakamacalataka tiko e dai, ni bibi na Lawa Vakaturi oqo baleta ni da railesu ena veika e mai yaco ena vuaviri ni 2006, na kena mai bucini tale na Yavu ni Vakavulewa ni 2013, ia na yavu ni vakasama ena gauna oya, na kena vakamalumalumutaki eso na veika me baleta na noda matataki na i Taukei, se na kena bucini se na kena taqomaki mai na gauna oya, sa dodonu meda dikeva tale me vakadeitaki tale. O koya oya, e kau cake tiko mai kina na lawa oqo.

Na lawa oqo e sega ni kau tu ga mai vakaveitalia baleta me dua ga na lawa me buli tiko me tukuni me taqomaki na i Taukei. E sega! Oqo me vakadodonutaki na veika sa cala tu – oya na kena bibi, o koya au vakamatatataka tiko kina oya, ena vuku ni noda raica tiko ni mai veiveisau tiko na Yavu ni Vakavulewa mai na loma ni vica na yabaki mai na 1970 ka yacova mai 'qo, na Yavu ni Vakavulewa ni 2013 sa cakacakataka tiko na Matanitu oqo me vakavinakataki, ka me veisautaki ena loma ni vica na vula sa tu 'qo e matada. E dua na kena gacagaca oqo me vakadodonutaki.

[What I want to explain today is this: the law that has been brought forward is important because when we look back at what happened from the events of 2006, and then the establishment of the 2013 Constitution, certain provisions concerning the recognition, establishment and protection of iTaukei rights.

Therefore, it is only right that we reassess these matters and ensure they are strengthened again. That is why this law has been introduced. This Bill was not brought in carelessly, as if it were just another bill to protect the iTaukei. No! It is to correct the things that have been wronged – and this is what I can emphasise because we can see the Constitution has been changed several times from the 1970s until now. The 2013 Constitution is currently being reviewed by the present Government so that it can be improved and amended within the next few months before us. This Bill is one of the steps to correct these issues.]

I think there is another paragraph here and it is very interesting, and I quote:

“To maintain one’s self worth, culture needs to be dynamic and vibrant. Capturing it in institutions makes culture parochial, irrelevant, prone to manipulation, and not in the interest of law.”

Let me repeat that, “Capturing it in institutions makes culture irrelevant”. That was what happened in the last Government. That specific conclusion was made practical through the removal of the GCC, because that kind of ideology viewed that as a cultural institution which might dominate the State. That is exactly what honourable Usamate is probably asking, but it will not be like that - it will not dominate the State or be a threat to the State.

“Na ka ga au vakabibitaka tiko oya na veika e tiko ena lawa ogo ena sega ni mai vakaleqa na cici ni Matanitu, baleta na Matanitu e cici tiko ena Palimedi o koya e bulia na lawa, ka vakatalega kina ni Matanitu e cici tiko ena rukuni lawa levu taudua, oya na Yavu ni Vakavulewa.”

That is what we are reassuring today to the people of Fiji, the framework of law, including Parliament and the Constitution remains paramount. We have expressed our respect for that through our submission to the Courts for the interpretation of various provisions of the Constitution, and that is being followed closely by the Coalition Government in a very responsible way.

The conclusion, therefore, cultural autonomy must have a sunset clause. Its prolonged use or existence will place a stranglehold on the very members it seeks to protect, and it will concurrently disallow the critical cultural space in which a just, vibrant and coherent Nation State can flourish.

That conclusion basically states that the two cannot move together - the State and cultural institution, which is a total hogwash! The two can coexist. We are witnessing that today. The 1970 Constitution was formulated with the input from the chiefs, the National Federation Party, the Alliance and our political leaders at that time, and it included elements of bicameral Parliament - the Upper House (Senate) and the Lower House (House of Representatives), and it worked well. It is really up to the leaders for us to look at it, I suppose, in an open-minded way and in a way where our objective is not one dominating someone else, but rather a peaceful coexistence.

The ideology I mentioned from the FijiFirst, it was a domination of the State of cultural institutions, especially the indigenous framework or institutions. It went to the extent that when we were in the Opposition, we were not even allowed to ask a question on specific areas or provinces. So, at the Business Committee, we were told, that we should not be asking about specific areas but just to ask general national questions.

What I am saying is that that kind of ideology during the last Government was, sort of, taken to an extreme. We are now in a new Parliament, and I have seen change in those who were sitting on this side at that time, which is a good thing. This Bill which is in front of us is basically to correct that situation. I know that there are some concerns, then we will go through the Committee, but let me reassure the people of Fiji that it is not to dominate anyone but rather for clarity. For example, the iTaukei institutions, has the GCC sought to dominate up to now?

No, it has basically an institution which is collecting the views of the indigenous and expressing views on it for development, et cetera. Has it declared itself independent? No! So, the mindset of the indigenous people is such that we operate within the law, or the institutions will operate within the law. In terms of some of the points mentioned, how do you get prior consent, as it is part of the Article? Prior consent processes are already happening. When you want to lease native land, the consent of the landowners is sought - 60 percent; and even in development projects, the process of prior consent is already there.

The mention of identity, *iTaukei* identity is a threat to other identities. No, it is already there in the Fijian Affairs Act as already mentioned by the honourable Minister. There was the issue of self-determination mentioned. This is not self-determination in a separatist manner. This is a self-determination in terms of expressions of *meke*, indigenous expressions and in terms of having your own *Bose Vanua*, *Bose ni Tikina*, *Bose ni Yasana* – it is already happening. The Constitution is paramount; that is another point. The one normally stated by the last government, you cannot recognise UNDRIP in Fiji because the indigenous people in Fiji are not a threatened population or a minority.

The example is, in the last government, the threat to indigenous peoples or their institutions or their self-governance, it does not have to come from within the indigenous, it can come from the State, which happened in the last government. So, even though the majority were there, those who are in control of the institutions of the State had threatened the indigenous institutions and their ability to determine matters for themselves and their institutions, including the *Bose Vanua*, *Bose ni Yasana*. It is not a valid argument.

So, these are some of the points I thought to raise today, and as a Coalition Government, we would like to reassure the people of Fiji, this is not a threat to anyone and as a responsible government, of course, as a government which is a caring one, not a dictatorship definitely, we go through the Committee, and if there are issues or concerns. we will definitely look at that.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank all those who contributed to the Bill, and I understand there are some concerns regarding the Bill. As I have already mentioned when I introduced the Bill, there will be some who will be thinking that they will be affected by the Bill, but with section 84, we made sure that consultations is done properly.

I have faith in the Sub-Committee that will be taking the Bill during consultations to get all the views from the people of Fiji and bring it back to the House. The House will then debate again, and when the Bill passed, another whole month is given for the National Action Plan to be prepared. The action plan will be brought back to Parliament. It will go through the normal process, and everyone will be taken care of. We are all Fijians, but I think for so long the *iTaukei* know that UNDRIP is there, why not take care of UNDRIP and put it into some perspective with some of the shortfalls they think need to be addressed. We have come here to take it to the people, let them get their views, and they will bring it back to us.

Mr. Speaker, I have reached the Sub-Committee that will take the Bill, will do their utmost best and try and address some of the concerns that are raised here. The Bill has been long overdue. That should have been addressed a few years back, to make sure the concerns of the indigenous people of this country are taken care of. I support the Bill.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[Rights of Indigenous People's Bill 2025 (Bill No. 37/2025) referred to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights and Committee to report back to Parliament within 30 days or future sitting of Parliament]

TRADEMARKS (AMENDMENT) BILL 2025

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Wednesday, 6th August, 2025 and the Communication from the Speaker on Wednesday, 1st October, 2025, I move:

That the Trademarks (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Bill No. 28/2025), be debated, voted upon and be passed.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please take note pursuant to resolution of Parliament on Wednesday, 1st October, 2025, the debate on the Bill will be limited to one hour.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to speak on the Trademarks (Amendment) Bill 2025 tabled before this House in the August sitting of Parliament this year. At the outset, I wish to extend my sincere appreciation to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence for tabling its Report and for the extensive consultations undertaken with key stakeholders throughout this process. The Committee's thorough review, together with available comments and recommendations provided in the Report on the Bill are duly acknowledged and appreciated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bill introduces substantive changes to the Trademarks Act 2021. These amendments are designed to strengthen our legal framework, safeguard Fiji's cultural heritage and ensure that our intellectual property regime remains aligned with international best practices. Allow me to highlight some key provisions.

First amendment to section 12 of the Trademarks Act 2021 expands the ground for refusal of trademark registration. Trademarks that reference culturally or religiously significant words or symbols will not be registered. This measure protects Fiji's heritage and prevents cultural appropriation, ensuring that sacred indigenous expressions are not exploited for commercial gain.

Second, the Bill introduced a new section 107A, empowering the court to grant temporary or provisional measures such as Anton Piller type orders to prevent infringement of preserved evidence. This responds directly to concerns raised by WIPO and ensures timely intervention before damages occur.

The third amendment is to section 110 to provide for definition to commercial scale for infringement, covering various levels of activity likely to harm rights holders. By doing so, the law provides clarity for enforcement agencies and strengthens the fight against counterfeiting.

The fourth amendment to section 131 addresses timelines for responding to infringement proceedings. This amendment is more so to harmonise with section 129(2). This avoids conflicting provisions and speeds up dispute resolution, thereby enhancing efficiency in our judicial processes.

The fifth amendment to section 173 of the Act revises the transitional provision. Existing trademarks containing indigenous words, marks or symbols cannot be renewed without the Minister's written consent. This provision safeguards indigenous knowledge, cultural property, ensuring that the renewal of such trademarks is subject to careful oversight.

Amendments to the Bill - Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to draw attention to the amendments made to the Bill itself, specifically clauses 2, 5 and 6.

Clause 2 of the Bill further amends section 12 to require the Commissioner, within 14 days to provide a reason for not registering a trademark. This is to allow for any aggrieved person the pathway to appeal the decision under section 145 of the Act, which states, and I read: “A person who is aggrieved by the decision of the Commissioner under this Act may appeal to the Court.”

Clause 5 of the Bill has been amended to agree to reflect the recommendation of the Standing Committee on the timeline.

Clause 6 of the Bill is further amended for cosmetic changes and does not affect the policy intent of the Bill.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker Sir, the Trademarks (Amendment) Bill 2025 is a transformative reform. It strengthens our legal framework, empowers our businesses and protects our consumers. I commend the Standing Committee for their diligence and foresight. I, therefore, stand in support of the Bill.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to speak on the Trademarks (Amendment) Bill. One of the main functions of a trademark is to enable consumers to identify a product of an entity from those of its competitors. In the same way, allowing the indigenous or local communities, owners of the cultural expressions to register the expressions as trademarks, will assist the recognition of their culture, easy identification of their authentic goods and services, and foster indigenous and local communities' economic development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill allows the indigenous and local communities to use the registered cultural expressions as a tool of distinction and branding with a good marketing strategy. It will lead to an increase consumer recognition of the cultural expression as well as commercial benefits.

Section 11 of the new Trademarks Act 2021 has a provision for the registration of collective marks that will allow collective associations in our indigenous and local communities to register collective marks in respect of goods produced by its members. This provision can be taken advantage of by cooperatives, youth groups, *mataqali*, *tokatoka*, and all other collective associations in our indigenous and local communities.

This Bill proposes five amendments. Section 12(2)(c) prohibits the registration of the word “Fiji”, a body corporate name, or a trading name as a trademark without the approval of the Minister. The proposed amendment is broadly defined, ambiguous, and vague for a single individual - the Minister - to decide without his decision being challenged or appealed in a court of law. The Minister is not required under section 12 to obtain expert advice from a third-party regarding issues of cultural, spiritual, or historical significance. Instead, it allows the Minister to make decisions based on his own opinion and knowledge. This is more problematic because the Minister’s decision cannot be appealed or challenged in a court of law.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Act does not specify the procedure in cases where the Minister approves an application under the amendment, but the application is opposed by members of the public during the subsequent opposition. Without court precedence, requirements for Expert input decisions made under this proposed amendment might be inconsistent, varying with each successive Minister. Given the commercial nature of trademarks, timely registration is paramount for business owners.

Section 12 does not specify a timeline for decisions by the Minister. This can be problematic based on the busy schedule of the Minister. Section 12 and the proposed amendment do not provide the process of obtaining the approval of the Minister. This section also does not require the Minister to provide reasons for his decision made under this section. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the proposed

amendment could potentially impede local trademark owners, including SMEs from registering marks that embody a local Fiji entity.

The second amendment is section 107(a), which aims to introduce an interim measure for trademark owners whose trademarks have been or are likely to be infringed, and the honourable Acting Attorney-General has already spoken on this.

The third amendment is section 110. The proposed amendment aims to define “commercial scale”. This amendment is necessary and will greatly assist in determining whether an offence has been committed under section 110.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the next amendment is section 131(3) of the Act, which reduces the opposition period from 20 to 7 days for owners of infringing goods to oppose a notice of sanction. Under Section 131, upon the rights owner providing sufficient evidence of infringing goods, FRCS has the authority to destroy or dispose of the infringing goods without a court order or even without a request from the rights holder that the goods be destroyed. Given the irreversible nature of FRCS action under this section and the potential risk associated with destroying goods without a court order, it is suggested that 10 working days for opposition would be more suitable.

Another amendment is section 173, where it is proposed that trademarks registered under the Trademarks Act 1933 may not be eligible for renewal under the new Act. The proposed amendment to section 173 may pose significant problems to the relevant current owners of registered trademarks under the Trademarks Act 1933. Many of these owners have invested considerable time, financial resources, and effort into establishing their trademarks and building strong reputations to differentiate their goods in the market. Under the proposed amendment, there is a risk that these businesses could lose the substantial investments they have made. This may necessitate them to alter their trademarks and embark on the erroneous process of rebuilding their brand from the beginning.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must balance protection with enabling indigenous participation in commerce. Indigenous Fijians are a majority, and their cultural expressions play a crucial role in tourism, branding, and small business development. Overly restrictive rules could impede business growth, economic development, and the use of indigenous words by Fijian entrepreneurs and service providers.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to lend my full support to the Trademarks (Amendment) Bill 2025. The Bill is not only timely, it is necessary for ensuring that Fiji’s trademark regime is modern, enforceable, culturally grounded in our multi-ethnic Fiji, and aligned with our international obligations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence received submissions from key institutions and legal practitioners. These contributions clearly highlight one common theme, Fiji must move forward from an outdated system to one that protects both commerce and culture.

The Solicitor-General's Office reminded the Committee that although the Trademarks Act 2021 was enacted, it had never commenced. Fiji continues to rely, therefore, on the Trademarks Act 1933, a law almost a century old and no longer suitable for today's commercial environment.

The Bill, therefore, is a step towards closing enforcement gaps, strengthening compliance with Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement and the Paris Convention, and building national capacity through recruitment and the training of examiners.

Together, both the Solicitor-General's Office and the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs affirm that this Bill strikes an essential balance, modernising Fiji's trademark system, protecting cultural heritage and ensuring clarity on the roles of the Minister and the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs.

The amendments also outline transitional arrangements for existing registrants and introduce continuous protection for traditional knowledge and cultural expressions. Law firms noted the need for clearer reasoning timelines and the avenues for appeal. The Committee acknowledges these concerns, but the context is important, Sir.

Under the 1933 Act, and we heard that from honourable Virendra Lal, already, the Minister already has extensive powers. Under the 2021 Act, there is an appeal process under section 145 in relation to the Commissioner's decision.

The amendment simply clarifies that these powers must be exercised in consultation with the Ministry of the iTaukei Affairs, an institution which represent our people of different ethnic origins. It is not unchecked discretion; it is structured discretion with cultural oversight.

Some firms understandably were concerned about the fairness to businesses with existing marks. The Bill provides transitional pathways and requires collaboration with cultural owners going forward. It does not unreasonably extinguish long-standing rights. It simply ensures fairness to communities.

Legal practitioners expressed concerns about unresolved cases due to the absence of a functioning tribunal. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2021 Act, together with this amendment, strengthens the framework and directs resources toward proper structures and staffing so that such cases can finally be resolved. The Committee noted concerns about shortened timelines for Customs enforcement and have amended the Bill to provide a more reasonable timeframe of 10 working days to allow adequate time for affected parties to comply. The intention is not to disadvantage businesses, but to enable faster action against counterfeit goods. Sir, FRCS strongly supported the amendments because they enhanced Fiji's border protection regime, an area where delays cannot be afforded.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FRCS confirmed that the Bill advances Fiji's compliance with border protection obligations, strengthens enforcement against counterfeit goods, and enhances confidence amongst legitimate traders and investors and this is about protecting businesses, consumers and the integrity of Fiji's market.

The Bill, Mr. Speaker, is about balance, economic, cultural and legal. It modernises Fiji's trademark system, it protects our heritage, it strengthens enforcement, and it aligns our laws with global standards.

The Committee is satisfied that the concerns raised are manageable, many already addressed through the principal Act and others best implemented through regulations, guidelines and capacity building.

With those reasons, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the Trademarks (Amendment) Bill 2025.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, I rise today to address the vital issues raised in this joint submission by the Solicitor-General's Office, Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and other stakeholders and to reflect on the Committee's careful consideration of the Trademarks (Amendment) Bill 2025.

First, let me speak about protecting our cultural symbols and traditional knowledge. Our national identity is tied to the indigenous and traditional words, symbols and names that carry

spiritual, historical and cultural significance. Words like ‘*bula*’ and ‘*na lagi*’ are not just mere terms, they are living parts of who we are. The Bill, as proposed places safeguards at the very heart of our system.

Clause 2, in particular, ensures that trademarks involving indigenous words or expressions cannot be registered or renewed without the written consent of the Minister and only after proper verification and consultation with the affected communities. This is not a barrier, Mr. Speaker, to commerce, it is a necessary protection for the integrity of our heritage.

Second, on modernising and strengthening enforcement. The joint submissions underscore the imperative to align Fiji's intellectual property framework with our international obligations such as Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) and the Paris Convention. We cannot rely solely on outdated statutes such as the Trademarks Act 1933, nor can we pretend that a borrowed model from other jurisdictions will fit Fiji's current capacity.

The Trademarks Act 2021 has been enacted, yet it has yet to come into force. We must implement it decisively in a way that aligns with Fiji's resources, enforcement realities, and administrative capacity. We face real enforcement gaps; protection of smells, tastes or sounds remains beyond our immediate technical reach. But we can and must address this by building capacity through recruitment and training of examiners, and through practical, transparent procedures that deter infringement before it occurs.

The Committee's review highlights the need for timely decisions, clarity and accountability. Section 12, which grants Minister's discretion to approve or refuse applications involving indigenous expressions, must be balanced with the obligation to provide reasons and to consider supporting evidence, including community consent. It must be subject to appeal or review to ensure transparency and to prevent undue delays that could hinder legitimate business interests.

Ultimately, the aim is to safeguard Fiji's unique cultural and traditional knowledge while fostering a conducive environment for legitimate business, tourism and creative enterprise. The Bill represents a positive step towards modernising Fiji's trademark framework, strengthening enforcement and protecting indigenous heritage. With thoughtful refinements, we can strike the right balance - fulfilling our international obligations, supporting economic development and ensuring that our cultural assets are safeguarded for generations to come.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must be mindful that protection should not turn into suppression, but with the guidelines that are there, the businesses should rather be encouraged to use traditional names and expressions promoting Fiji to the region and to the world.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for the opportunity to contribute very briefly to the Act to amend the Trademarks Act of 2021. In looking at the Bill, firstly, I would like to thank honourable Qereqeretabua and honourable Rinesh Sharma for eloquently explaining the merits of the Bill and its amendments. My endeavour today is just to touch briefly on perhaps some of the areas that I think needs just some flashing out.

The first one that attracted my attention, Mr. Speaker, was that the Act was passed in 2021 and had yet to be commenced by the Minister at the time. This is symptomatic of some of the Bills that we are seeing floating around in the system. The Climate Change Bill is still floating around, and there was a big hoo-ha when it was brought into existence. In other words, this side of the House is fixing the mess left by the other side of the House. We are actually putting into place all the legal frameworks necessary to ensure we have a modern economy in this country. I just thought I would make that point just to be clear, that in this passing, we are actually bringing to existence

something that was worked on by the other side of the House, but they did not bring it into motion.

The second item, Mr. Speaker, is the significance of this Bill in terms of the reform agenda that this side of the House is endeavoring to do. We will have an Act that is not only relevant for now, but for the future. In terms of being future-ready and relevant for what we are to do in the future, this is a Bill that will pass and bring about modern conditions in terms of trademarks.

The final contribution I would like to make, Mr. Speaker, is to do with the acknowledgement of the traditional side of our economy. We all agree, and as alluded to by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, that economy or opportunity we have not harnessed fully. If you look at the New Zealand economy and the Australian economy, they do a very good job in actually monetising all the opportunities that exist within their cultural side of the economy. I am hoping, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we all do, that through this Bill and the inclusions that have been highlighted, that we will start seeing the monetisation of the cultural side of the economy. One of the things that is mostly pleasing as well, it not only talks about *iTaukei* things of significance, it also talks about the multicultural society that we are.

In that regard, this is something worth passing into existence. It will bring us up to-date into the 21st and 22nd centuries. I would like to congratulate the Committee particularly for bringing this forward because it will certainly set Fiji on the trajectory that we think it all deserves.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank the Committee for their hard work with respect to the amendment Bill on the Trademarks Act and also just respond to a few things we have but raise something that is of extreme importance to all of us in this House.

Mr. Speaker, what is contained in the Bill is actually very important with respect to our cultural identity, all of those things that have been mentioned by the previous speakers. It is also something that brings us in compliance with TRIPS, forms part of WTO's requirements, et cetera in terms of WIPO also, that has provided a lot of assistance for the review of these particular provisions that need to be in the Bill and for the compatibility with TRIPS.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I think it is also important that like what the honourable Acting Attorney-General raised, the proviso, which is similar to Anton Pillar Order, it is important, and FRCS has given its opinions on it. They are important provisions to protect all that is there in terms of the law and in terms of our traditions and to protect what is Fijian. I might be raising some eyebrows here and I might get some bashing from the other side, I do not know. But it is important that we remember something. There is something in this Bill that is missing and there is something in this Bill that everyone needs to know about.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we just spoke very passionately about our cultures, traditions and about everything that is Fijian, but what every speaker here today has forgotten is that the word, Fiji. The owner of the trademark of that particular word is neither the Fijian Government nor the Fijian people. It is owned by the Fiji Water Company – that is alarming, but it has happened. It happened many moons ago. It was registered in the United States of America and the United Kingdom before it even came here. It is something that we have to now live with.

All of us as Fijians have to live with the fact that the name of our country is a registered trademark that is owned by a company in the United States. Why I say this today is because nothing in that Bill shows us that we are trying to find a way where our local companies can use that particular name. There is a saying that exists, Mr. Speaker, Sir, which says if you want to use it, you use it at your own peril, but you are not allowed to register that trademark.

We have previously had issues with Fiji Ginger - honourable Leader of Opposition will tell you. There was an objection from that very company. The waters, the beers, the Fiji Bitters, the Fiji Golds, anything and everything liquid, if you go and try and sell it in the USA or some other country where it is registered, you will get an objection if you go and try and sell it in the United States of America or some other country where it is registered, you will get an objection from the holder of the trademark.

The trademark is not owned by us, so there must be some way found for us to put into law, and I am sure Mr. Speaker, Sir, you will understand this more than anyone else that it is important that we find a way, or at least find a way forward where our local companies can actually use that, because they will get objected to.

We have a branding name called “Fijian Made”, if we want to designate our products, if someone puts a product and it is on a shelf in the US and it is water or anything liquid that comes from Fiji, you can guarantee it, you will raise a riot where that other owner of the trademark Fiji is going to object to it, because Fiji is being used. Why? Because we have lost it forever. And no one in this House can be blamed for it neither the previous government nor the current one.

It was way beyond that. How did that ever happen? Only the Lord knows. However, we must try and find a way where we can put in some kind of law or at least check with the legal boffins as to how this can work, because I do not think it is retrievable. My legal mind tells me that it is not retrievable. It is it. It is done for life. It is something that is painful to us. There is a lot of good that the Fiji Water company does in Fiji, but we have lost it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill covers a lot. It protects a lot, I agree with it, I support it, but that is one issue that a lot of very large companies in Fiji tell us about and that is their pet peeve that they are unable to use the name of their country and the origin of their product in different jurisdictions around the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, basically, I think this is something that needs to be addressed. I hope maybe the Acting Attorney-General can find a way forward on something that can be done with respect to this, but it is something that touches everyone’s heart because that is a cultural name too, Sir, it is our name. With those few words, I support the Bill before the House and I thank the Committee for their hard work on it, but at the same time, those are the questions that arise from this side of the House.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the Trademarks (Amendment) Bill 2025. This Bill is not just a legal update, it has a moral duty, a cultural responsibility, and a national commitment to safeguard who we are as Fijians. For too long, elements of *iTaukei* culture have been misused, copied and commercialised by individuals and corporations who had no right to claim the ownership.

Words like ‘*bula*’ and sacred *masi* design have been treated as commodities, stripped of meanings and used without the consent of the people who inherit them from their ancestors. This act of exploitation cause real hurt in our communities, especially to those who hold cultural knowledge, practice and skills and protect their tradition every day. This Bill answered those long outstanding concerns. It provides clear legal protection by stopping anyone from registering trademark that misuse *iTaukei* words, cultural expressions, sacred faces or traditional designs.

This Bill empowers the Registrar of Trademark to refuse any application that undermines our cultural integrity, whether the misuse comes from abroad or from within Fiji. Protecting cultural heritage is also about protecting national pride and sovereignty. Words like ‘*bula*’ and *masi* designs,

belong to all Fijians because they represent our identity to the world. When these are misused, we risk losing control of our own story. By supporting this amendment, we are clearly saying that Fiji's cultural heritage cannot be claimed, bought, or monopolised by anyone. It belongs to our people and remains under their guidance, guardianship forever. This is cultural justice, national integrity, and economic fairness; all working together.

Mr. Speaker, this Bill also strongly supports SDG 5 - Gender Equality, because the protection of cultural expression is inseparable from the protection of *iTaukei* women, who are the custodians of many of these traditions. It is the *iTaukei* women who create *masi*, shape cultural motifs, preserve traditional skills and teach these arts in our villages. When their designs are stolen, mass produced and sold without permission, it is these women who lose income, recognition and dignity. By stopping cultural theft, this Bill protects their work, safeguards their livelihoods and ensures that any economic benefits derived from this design, flows back to the women who are their rightful owners.

Mr. Speaker, the amendment Bill, builds the foundation for that future by ensuring that our trademarks system does not become a pathway for cultural exploitation. In closing, Mr. Speaker, let us remember that this is more than a Bill, it is a statement of who we are and what we stand for. By supporting it, Parliament is telling our people that we have heard their concerns, that we value their heritage and that we are willing to defend it with the full weight of the law.

We are protecting the sacred word and symbols that carry the *mana* of our ancestors. We are protecting *iTaukei* women, whose hands preserve our cultural art. We are strengthening national identity and ensuring that future generations inherit a cultural heritage that is respected and not abused. This Bill protects Fiji's soul and secures our cultural future. Mr. Speaker, I support the Bill before the House.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, if anything, this Bill demonstrates the political prowess of the Coalition Government. As articulated by honourable Kamikamica, 2021, no action. Yes, we heard so much from honourable Koya, he should have shared that with his Attorney General. But the intent of this side of the House, Mr. Speaker, is very clear.

This week has been significant for the *iTaukei* people and for the people of Fiji. That demonstrates good leadership, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Thank you to the Committee. Thank you to each and every one who contributed to the suggestion. It is going to make a landmark change for Fiji, and I commend this Bill to the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[Trademarks (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Bill No. 28/2025) passed and enacted by the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji. (Act No. of 2025)]

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, this would be an appropriate time or point to suspend our proceedings for dinner. Parliament stands suspended and we will resume proceedings in 45 minutes.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.20 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 7.10 p.m.

CREDIT UNION BILL 2025

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Thursday, 7th August, 2025, and the Communication from the Speaker on Monday, 29th September, 2025, I move:

That the Credit Union Bill 2025 be debated, voted upon and be passed.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please take note that pursuant to resolution of Parliament on Thursday, 7th August, 2025 and the Communication from the Speaker on Monday, 29th September, 2025, the debate on the Bill will be limited to two hours.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the journey to this point has been more than a decade in the making. The Credit Union Act 1954, though foundational in its time, no longer serves the needs of our modern financial system. Since the International Monetary Fund's 2006 Financial Sector Assessment Programme, Fiji has been encouraged to review and strengthen its credit union framework to protect members, improve governance and support financial inclusion. The Reserve Bank of Fiji's own assessments, together with the industry calls for a reform – confirm the urgency for change.

The evidence is clear. Although more than 400 credit unions have been registered in Fiji over the past decades, only 17 remain active today. This steep decline from 400 in 2008 to just 17 in 2025 signals systemic weaknesses that cannot be ignored. Asset growth has stagnated, governance gaps persist, and the absence of modern supervision acts has exposed members to unnecessary risk. Without legislative reform, the decline will continue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill provides the solution. It introduces a modern and comprehensive framework that strengthens governance, embeds sound risk management practises, expands permitted services, and crucially transfers oversight to the Reserve Bank of Fiji. For the first time, credit unions will operate under a clear regulatory structure, with prudential safeguards to protect members' funds and enhance stability.

However, the Bill before this House today is stronger because of the work of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs. The Committee undertook extensive public consultations across the country, inviting credit unions, Government agencies, unions, school managements, businesses and the public to provide written and oral submissions. They ensured that every credit union, large or small, had the opportunity to be heard. The Committee's review report highlighted key concerns from stakeholders, and I wish to acknowledge them directly.

Firstly, the Committee observed concerns around potential overregulation of macro-management. Let me assure this House that the Reserve Bank of Fiji's oversight will be risk-based and proportionate, especially for smaller credit unions. Secondly, the Committee highlighted that the Bill must better reflect the capacity differences between larger and smaller credit unions. This is a valid point, and transitional arrangements will be designed to ensure that no credit union is unfairly burdened during implementation.

The Committee noted concerns around income taxation for credit unions. While the suggestion is for credit unions to be tax exempt, this needs to be aligned to the Income Tax Act to

ensure there is a level playing field for all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee's bipartisan approach has enriched this Bill and ensured that the interests of members remain at the heart of the reform. The Bill is not about restricting credit unions; it is about empowering them, enabling growth, restoring public confidence, and placing them on a firm and sustainable footing so they can continue serving ordinary working families across Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the state of the sector demands decisive actions. The reform in this Bill will modernise the credit union industry, deepen financial inclusion, protect members' savings, and strengthen financial stability. It is time that Fiji's credit unions are governed by a framework that matches today's financial realities, not those of 70 years ago.

With those remarks, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. I have a list of speakers with me. Each of the Speakers is entitled to 10 minutes.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in support of the Credit Union Bill 2025 (Bill No. 29 of 2025), which seeks to repeal the Credit Unions Act 1954, and replace it with a modern, comprehensive, and robust legal framework governing the establishment, regulation and supervision of credit unions in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill is an essential reform because it recognises the significant evolution of the financial landscape over the past seven decades. The 1954 Act, while foundational in its time, no longer provides the safeguards, clarity or regulatory capacity required in today's complex financial environment. The current Bill, therefore, introduces much-needed modernisation that will strengthen public confidence, promote financial stability and support the long-term sustainability of credit unions as key contributors to financial inclusion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to outline some core reasons why this Bill is timely, necessary, and worthy of this House's support. The Bill introduces a clear, structured, and transparent licensing regime for both, newly formed and existing credit unions. Sections 10 to 13, set out criteria that assess governance capacity, financial viability, membership base and internal systems. This ensures that every credit union operating in Fiji is sound, accountable and capable of protecting members' savings. This reform ensures that credit unions are built on a strong foundation from day one.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the most commendable aspects of the Bill is that it emphasises good governance. It establishes clear responsibilities for Boards and Committees; mandatory, fit and proper assessments for Directors; internal controls and supervisory oversight; and a structured decision-making process.

These measures are not burdens; they are protections. They safeguard members from mismanagement, conflicts of interest, and abuse of authority. They bring credit unions in line with international cooperative standards and ensure that members' funds are entrusted to capable and ethical leadership.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill provides Fiji with a credit union system that is resilient and future ready. It introduces minimum capital and liquidity requirements, reserve allocations, and standards for asset quality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these measures strengthen the financial stability of credit unions, giving their members confidence that their savings are protected, and that the institution is capable of

withstanding economic shocks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji will have a legislation that provides a full supervisory cycle for credit unions. The Reserve Bank of Fiji is empowered to monitor compliance, issue directives when necessary and intervenes in situations where members' interests are at risk.

Particularly important are the provisions on controllership, safety management and structured liquidation procedures. These mechanisms ensure that when difficulties arise, they are managed transparently and in a way that prioritises members' rights and financial safety. The old Act provided very limited resource in these situations, leaving members vulnerable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill is not merely regulatory, it is enabling. By setting clear rules, strengthening governance and aligning credit unions with global standards, the Bill creates an environment where credit unions can grow confidently, expand their reach and attract more members. For rural communities, workers and low-income earners, who rely on credit unions on accessible financial services, this Bill is a significant step towards greater financial empowerment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Credit Union Bill 2025 is a decisive reform that replaces a 70-year-old law with a framework that is modern, principled, protective and growth-oriented. It strengthens governance, enhances accountability, protects member funds, and positions credit unions as credible and resilient players in the national financial system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am confident that this Bill will elevate the credit union sector and contribute positively to Fiji's broader financial stability and economic development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the Bill.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Credit Union Bill 2025.

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, Mr. Speaker, again, we have in front of us for the people of Fiji, a Bill that was done in 1954, and this side of the House is now bringing to Parliament for its approval - a comprehensive Bill that will ensure that in the years to come, the credit unions of this country are not neglected and have a legal modern framework in which to operate.

I wish to thank the Committee, particularly, that worked hard to bring this to this House. If anything, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can confidently say that this side of the House has taken hold of the reform agenda for Fiji, and we are making it happen, Mr. Speaker. Just in jest, I always remember when we started in this House, I used to sit directly opposite honourable Premila Kumar and she used to ask, where is the Bill? Then she shakes her head.

The Bills are here, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We have a lot more to do. There will be more Bills coming through very shortly, so this side of the House can confidently say to the people of Fiji that we are reforming some of the outdated, antiquated, irrelevant laws that have existed in Fiji for quite some time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, very briefly, the Bill is an excellent Bill because it covers the whole regime that is required to actually manage credit unions. Just like banks, they are responsible for maintaining the deposits of their members. This Bill allows or ensures that those deposits are no longer at risk, that they are supervised by the banking or financial regulator of this country. There will be adequate oversight over the credit unions to ensure that going forward, the credit unions maintain sustainable and relevant, and that issues around good governance, et cetera, are protected and

enhanced.

There are provisions in here, for example, for licensing, as mentioned by honourable Hem Chand, and what I particularly like is the focus on fit and proper conditions. In other words, Mr. Speaker, you have to be a fit and proper person before you are in charge of a credit union in terms of the board and its management. That is an excellent advance forward for this country, because it will ensure that the governance framework for another critical sector in our economy remains well governed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have two other points to make. One, I do note that the cooperatives that are also credit unions are, sort of, in this Bill and they will have to be licensed as well, which is excellent. It brings all credit unions under one regulation and also ensures that all credit unions are well managed.

The most successful credit union, which is a cooperative that comes to mind, is, of course, the FTU Credit Union and also the FTA Credit Union, which are models of economic success in this country. I am proud to say that we have been working, particularly, with the FTA Credit Union and this will definitely enhance what they are endeavoring to do in terms of their members.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, just perhaps as a hopeful comment, particularly, to the honourable Minister for Finance, another area that we probably need to look at in terms of governance would be hire purchase companies. That is probably something that we can, perhaps, look at as a Parliament in the future, to just ensure that the levels of scrutiny and governance over our financing sector, be it a bank, a credit union and even a hire purchase company, that equal and detailed scrutiny is applied across these types of entities.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, I fully support the Credit Union Bill 2025, and we do own the reform agenda of this country.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to give credit where credit is due. For 36 months, today is the day we have seven bills in the House, but who is counting? No one, Sir.

We are actually commending this Bill and there is support for this Bill. I think it is very important, as spelt out by earlier speakers, there has been some half a century that has gone in terms of the old law that was in place. Obviously, a lot has developed since that particular time and it needed it because it was considerably slow in terms of the legal framework that has not kept pace with what has actually gone on.

I think the Bill was actually designed also from a model law which is contained in the actual Bill that was developed by the World Council of Credit Unions and the expertise from the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) has actually helped us to get it to this particular stage.

Some of the objectives in terms of the provisions of the Bill, has set an overarching goal was to maintain public confidence in credit unions and doing business in Fiji throughout promoting the soundness of the financial system. This is important, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because the credit unions here are quite busy and needed some more guidance because, as I have said earlier, the laws were quite old.

Mr. Speaker, some of the salient features proposed by the RBF and in the Bill was that the RBF actually be the regulatory and supervisory authority for credit unions conducting credit union business in Fiji, like financial institutions, they also manage a substantial amount of funds. It is actually important that they get regulated, especially in light of the fact that the financial landscape

nowadays has changed with a lot that has happened, so this is sorely needed.

Also, in terms of the members and the requirement that there be some kind of supervision by a knowledgeable external agency and who better than the RBF itself. It also presents the processes for applicants who want to register in their interest in actually opening a credit union licence, and a lot of things that need to be met before you actually get or maintain a particular licence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it also provides for the role of the credit union league and outlines its functions, in carrying out for its members, the credit unions, for example, pooling the funds for investments, et cetera, all of that will be regulated within this sector. It is actually important that anyone and everyone who wants to be part of it or is going to be looking at credit unions, probably, needs to read this Bill comprehensively to find out what can and what cannot be done, et cetera.

Also, the powers, the scope and activities and responsibilities of the league are actually detailed within the constitution of that particular credit union, and that must be approved by the RBF, so the RBF holds a lot of authority. I think it is important in a small country like Fiji that they oversee such an operation. It also provides for the offences that are created against the credit union or personnel employed by the credit union, and I am talking about things like defamation and disclosure of confidential information. Those points are very important, and they need to be legislated against. Also, in terms of investments and without following the correct procedures, et cetera, that is also covered quite well in the Bill itself.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, lastly, it also provides for a number of standard provisions for credit unions, including exemption of income tax. It is actually important for credit unions' requirement to comply with the Financial Transactions Reporting Act 2012 and that is important as a requirement for all financial institutions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just in short, it is a welcome piece of legislation. It is very timely that it does happen because credit unions are institutions that are of great use to a lot of Fijians, and it is important that we get the right guidance, and the RBF is the right authority to regulate it and oversee the operations. We support the Bill before the House.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the Credit Union Bill 2025 and to address several key questions relating to the current state of credit unions and the mandate of the Registrar of Credit Unions.

According to a data held by the Registrar of Credit Unions, Fiji currently has 400 credit unions registered under the existing Credit Union Act 1954. However, to-date, only 17 remain operational. These numbers reflect not only a dramatic decline in activity, but also structural weaknesses inherent in the existing regulatory framework.

Under the Act, the Registrar of Credit Unions, housed within the Ministry of Justice, holds responsibility for the registration and basic administrative oversight. However, the Act does not provide for modern and prudent supervision, risk management standards, governance requirements or enforcement powers.

The Registrar's mandate is limited and does not align with the complexities of today's financial landscape. The Ministry of Justice, by its nature, is not positioned to function as a financial regulator, which results in capacity constraints that hinder effective supervision and compliance monitoring.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, several operational legal issues have arisen as a result of this outdated

framework. The inability to enforce compliance meaningfully has contributed to a large number of dormant credit unions.

Reviews conducted in partnership with the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) identified systematic risks in governance, internal audits, loan classification, liquidity management and other financial activities. These risks cannot be adequately addressed under the current Act, leaving members, ordinary Fijian families, exposed to vulnerabilities that should no longer be tolerated in a modern financial system.

For this reason, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the proposed transfer of registration supervisory functions from the Ministry of Justice to the RBF is both, timely and necessary. The reform is not about burdening small community institutions, but about safeguarding member funds and supporting financial inclusion, ensuring that creditors can grow into a stable and trustworthy financial vehicles for ordinary Fijians. The Credit Union Bill 2025 represents years of review, consultation and expert technical input, including from the IMF's Pacific Financial Technical Assistance Centre. It is a Bill grounded in evidence, informed by international best practice and tailored specifically to Fiji circumstances.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill provides the legal and institutional foundation required to revitalise the credit union sector. It strengthens governance, enhances risk management, and empowers credit unions to serve their members better. Ultimately, it contributes to a more inclusive, stable and resilient financial system for our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the Bill and commend it to the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the honourable Minister for Finance, Commerce and Business Development to exercise his right of reply.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank all the speakers on the Bill. At the outset I heard that there was not any key burning objection or question to any part of the Bill, apart from honourable Kamikamica's request to look at the hire purchase in the financing sector of the financial industry. However, the Ministry of Finance is aware of the same and that is the next issue that we will attend to. I think we all agree to the amendments and the changes and the inclusion therein.

With those comments Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge all honourable Members to support the motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed.

[Credit Union Bill 2025 (Bill No. 29/2025) passed and enacted by the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji. (Act No. of 2025)]

BURIAL AND CREMATION (AMENDMENT) BILL 2025

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Thursday, 2nd October, 2025, I move:

That the Burial and Cremation (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Bill No. 30/2025), be

debated, voted upon and passed.

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

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for this opportunity to speak on the Bill. I will try to be brief as possible, in terms of the build up to the Bill in all its entirety from the work done by the Ministry. I must also thank the Standing Committee that looked after the Bill, taking it around for second round of submissions, and as well as coming into the current form as we are debating on.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the Bill itself, it is an outdated Bill, 1911, and as such, a modernised Burial and Cremation Act would strengthen public health protection, support financial sustainability and integrate new technologies and ensure that all burials and cremation facilities operate under a unified contemporary regulatory framework.

I have said much yesterday, Mr Speaker, Sir, on the Bill, and I know we will have the full support of the other Members and commend the Bill to the House and fully support it.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to briefly speak on the Burial and Cremation (Amendment) Bill 2025. While my colleagues and I acknowledge the importance of updating a century-old Act from 1911, and at the outset, we want to say that we support the amendments within this Bill. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we see this as any government's duty of care, and I thank the honourable Minister for bringing this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, death touches us all at every community. Our duty to the dead is a fundamental measure of our humanity and our unity as a nation. We need to give our people the dignity, give them the respect, give them the essential services that are their right. Another departed by truly serving the living.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, apart from the amendments, there are some associated issues that needed to be addressed. Sometimes we see our public cemeteries, the final resting places of our loved ones are overgrown and neglected. Roads leading to the burial grounds, especially in our rural areas, become impossible during rainy weather. As we are discussing our burial grounds, the amendments as the honourable Minister stated, we request special capital project grants to timely upgrade the cemetery access roads, and the entire upkeep of our cemeteries. Our dead deserve a peaceful, accessible place, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

We also suggest a budgeted plan for the complete upgrade and maintenance of all mortuaries in the country. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we should also have a clear road map with timelines for developing modern cremators by public-private partnership in all the divisions. I hope that in future, as this Bill has been brought Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will have a similar type of Bill to address these issues that have not been attended to.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just for the information of the House, in 2017, a facility was built in Vatuwaqa, and during the groundbreaking ceremony, it was announced that a similar facility will be constructed in Nausori, Lautoka and in the Northern Division. Mr. Speaker, Sir, these facilities were constructed to carry out the rituals, and I hope as I have said earlier on, that the Minister concerned will take note of it and will inform this House in future sittings on these developments.

In conclusion, Sir, while we are approaching the festive season, may I also take this opportunity to wish you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and the staff of Parliament, the honourable Prime Minister,

honourable Leader of the Opposition and the honourable Members of this Parliament the very best wishes for the festive season.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to speak in support of the Burial and Cremation (Amendment) Bill 2025, with particular focus on section 2, which introduces a vital new definition in the Principal Act.

The Burial and Cremation Act was enacted in 1911, a time when scientific understanding was limited, medical and forensic practices were basic, and burial customs were far simpler than they are today. The existing definitions do not align with current public health practices, modern burial and cremation technologies, or the evolving legal and cultural environment of Fiji.

Section 2 modernises the Act by introducing four key definitions that enhance clarity, enforcement and regulatory consistency. This is one of the most significant updates, as new definition now encompasses bodies, organs, tissue, limbs, bone, ashes and any anatomical material, whether attached or detached, preserved or dissected. This is essential because human remains are now involved in numerous medical procedures like autopsies, amputation, transplant, research and clinical interventions. Without a clear legal definition, ambiguity exists around the treatment, storage, transportation or disposal of body parts. This amendment ensures respect, accountability and proper oversight at every stage. It closes the long-term standing gap and safeguards human dignity.

On the burial ground definition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is more encompassing now. It reflects modern practices with burial sites today, not limited to just the open soil plots. They now include structured facilities used by diverse communities and different faiths. This clarity will support better planning, compliance and environmental oversight, especially in urban and peri-urban areas.

In strengthening the public health regulatory control, precise definitions are a foundation of effective law. You cannot enforce what you do not clearly define. This update supports public health safety, environmental protection, the placement of corpses in the ground, respect for the dignity and cultural rights of families and the proper operation of burial and cremation facilities. Section 2 now provides better clarity of our law, which has lagged in over 110 years.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, while this amendment seems technical, it is fundamental. It modernises our legal understanding of burial, cremation and the handling of body parts, ensuring that Fiji's legal framework is clear, respectful, enforceable and aligned with international best public health practices and standards. I fully support this amendment.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to contribute to the debate on the Burial and Cremation (Amendment) Bill 2025. We stand here as representatives tasked with governing all aspects of our citizens' lives, but none is more fundamental, more emotionally charged than the final dignity we afford our departed loved ones. A funeral is not merely a formality. It is one of the most solemn, heartfelt rituals of human existence. It is the final expression of respect, love and closure for the family in mourning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for every Fijian, regardless of faith or background, the ability to bury or cremate a family member in a peaceful, regulated and safe environment is not a privilege. It is a sacred right and a fundamental expectation of a civilised state. The current law, the Principal Act dates back to 1911 - 114 years ago. Our legislative framework for burial has been far too long stagnant. Therefore, I stand on this side of the House to offer the Opposition's unequivocal support for the principles of this Bill. We commend the honourable Minister and the Government for finally bringing forward this long-overdue modernisation. This is a vital step towards securing the dignity

of our people.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the Bill successfully addresses several archaic elements, and we commend them:

- The necessary harmonisation of the law by converting yards to metres (clause 4) is a welcome technical correction.
- The inclusion of body parts and provision for columbaria and mausoleums in the definitions (clause 2) acknowledges the growing acceptance of cremation and modern interment practices.
- The increase in penalties across the board is necessary. A \$200 fine for illegal burials is not a deterrent in 2025. The new \$5,000 fine for burying in an unlicensed ground finally reflects the gravity of the offence.

Mr Speaker, Sir, these are essential positive changes. Our duty in this honourable House is to ensure that the law, untouched for about a century, is not just amended, but truly future-proofed. Having passed the Committee stage, our focus now is on securing a concrete policy to address the remaining challenges. It is our responsibility to explicitly protect our sacred spaces from vandalism and criminal trespass.

Public submissions, particularly those from the Raiwaqa (Navua) Crematorium Committee, have highlighted the severe and disturbing issue of cemeteries being misused for public disorder, theft, and desecration of graves. They are sadly being treated like nightclubs and dumping grounds.

With clause 6 which increases the fine for disorderly behaviour from \$50 to \$1,000, I hope this remains a deterrent to those who commit this grievous offence of desecration and vandalism. I hope that the honourable Minister will commit to immediately develop a new operational policy framework that clearly defines and enables zero-tolerance enforcement of vandalism and trespass in our burial grounds. This framework shall prioritise the use of community-based corrections for offenders, ensuring they are asked to repair the very spaces they have damaged.

The second important issue is sustainability and the looming land crisis. The Fiji Corrections Service warns that major urban cemeteries like Suva and Nasinu will be exhausted in the next 10 to 15 years. This is a national emergency, demanding a policy response, not just a legislative one. We request the honourable Minister to commit to developing a national cemetery land acquisition and leasing strategy within 12 months. This strategy should proactively involve the Ministry of Lands and the iTaukei Land Trust Board, in collaboration with the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs, so that funding is available to pay goodwill to the landowners of the cemetery when the lease expires.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to draw the attention of this House to the case of Kawakawa Cemetery, situated in Kawakawa, Waiqele, Labasa. The lease for the cemetery had expired and the members had to raise funds to pay goodwill of \$11,000 to the landowners through the iTaukei Land Trust Board. This area is a small farming community, and the management and members of the cemetery had to work hard to acquire funds to make this payment. I am told that the management has applied for assistance from the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs, and they have been promised for partial assistance. I urge the Ministry to fully pay this amount to the iTaukei Land Trust Board so that the management and members can have their contributions back.

At this juncture, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs for funding the Bilalevu Cemetery Project in Sigatoka. Ask the Government to provide additional funding in the next budget to the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs so that payments on any cemetery lease expiry can be facilitated, no matter in which part of the country it is situated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I once again thank the management of Kawakawa Cemetery and its members for taking a proactive stand in securing the lease. I also wholeheartedly thank the iTaukei Land Trust Board and the landowners for consenting to the lease renewal of the Kawakawa Cemetery, which is our only burial place in the greater Kawakawa area. Mr. Speaker, Sir, with this, I fully support the motion before the House.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the Burial and Cremation (Amendment) Bill 2025. The Bill seeks to amend the Burial and Cremation Act 1911, to modernise this outdated piece of legislation, strengthen public health and regulatory compliance, clarify ministerial authority and accountability, and address long-standing gaps in the current Act.

In doing so, the Bill supports and complements the operational realities faced by the Fiji Corrections Service, which is responsible for the upkeep of all designated public graves under the Burial and Cremation Act 1911. Fiji currently has seven public cemeteries: Suva, Nasinu, Tavakubu, Vaturekuka, Nasova and Balawa are operational while Vatuwaqa is now full. On average, 10 to 12 burials take place across these public cemeteries every day at a cost of \$36.50 per plot.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the pressure on available land for public burials underscores the importance of modernising the law. Suva Cemetery is projected to be fully utilised by 2030, just five years from now, while Nasinu is projected to be fully exhausted by 2040, approximately 15 years from today. Tavakubu and Vaturekuka have sufficient land to cater for the next 25 years, but no new land has yet been identified for future expansion of public cemeteries nationwide.

Fiji Corrections Service incurs operational costs of about \$800 to \$1,000 per month to maintain the major public cemeteries. These pressures highlight the need for a clearer, modern, regulatory framework that supports safe, orderly and dignified burial and cremation services.

The Bill addresses these challenges firstly by amending section 2 of the Act to introduce an updated definition for terms such as “body parts”, “burial grounds” and “minister”. It also amends section 5, to provide a clearer specification for the location of burial grounds, crematoriums, modernising updated reference to yards and replacing them with standard measurements in meters.

Further, the Bill amends sections 4, 7 and 8 to strengthen penalties for burying in unlicensed ground, breaches of regulation and for other offences relating to burial and cremation. These amendments are crucial to maintaining public health standards and ensuring compliance with modern expectations.

Overall, Mr. Speaker, Sir, these amendments are necessary to ensure that Fiji’s burial and cremation laws meet contemporary public health needs, reflect modern administrative practice, and uphold dignity and order in the management of human remains, particularly as land availability becomes increasingly constrained. Accordingly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the Bill.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be very brief, I think enough has been said. Mostly, I think the Bill before the House is really a facilitative one because it is quite an old one. I am not sure if some of us were actually born around that time; it is 1911. It is so old on a lighter side, it, the measurement in it was still in the imperial. So, that has been amended. So, all in all, I think the amendments have been dealt with by the honourable Acting Attorney-General in terms of the offences, too. The definitions also have been changed with respect to burial grounds, et cetera. Registration issues with respect to new burial grounds.

In our consultation exercise, there are quite a few burial grounds that exist that are still not quite registered. They were just inquisitive about how it can be done. The representative from the

Ministry of Health who actually came with us informed them how to do it. Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are certain places around Fiji where the landowners have given up land for burial for either a family or a community, et cetera. We must remember they actually give these places up for life at end of the day. The land will never be of any use to it, and that kind of relationship has existed, and it was never really formalised.

The process of registration will require it to be formalised so that it actually can be registered within the Ministry as a proper burial ground, and otherwise they will get fined for burying someone in an unregistered burial ground. So, all of that information was given out to the general public. All in all, I think it was gladly accepted, and as I said, the amendments in the Bill are actually quite simple, they are not very hard to understand, and I think they were sorely needed, but complete support for this particular Bill before the House.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank each and every Member who have spoken in support of the Bill. In supporting this Bill, we passed this Bill to ensure that it is modernised, as has been rightly said. But that is just the first step, there is still a lot to do in terms of ensuring that burial grounds throughout the country are formalised, as rightly said by honourable Koya.

The Bill, in its direction, we intend to do that. I recognise the comments from honourable Nand in terms of vandalism. Yes, that is something that we as a community do not condone, especially as we view burial sites as sacred because of our loved ones' final resting place. That is something in the regulation or in ensuing the contents of the work that is to be carried forth by, not only the Fiji Corrections Service and the Ministry of Health through the health inspectors, but we also intend to ensure that they are looked after very well. Also, the comments from honourable Bala in terms of mortuary safekeeping, your comment is noted, and we will definitely try and ensure that it is implemented.

Nevertheless, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on behalf of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, I sincerely thank each and every one of the members of the Standing Committee, as well as all those who have spoken in support of the Bill.

MR. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[Burial and Cremation (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Bill No. 30/2025), passed and enacted by the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji (Act No. ... of 2025)]

QUARANTINE (AMENDMENT) BILL 2025

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Thursday, 2nd October 2025, I move:

That the Quarantine (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Bill No.31/2025), be debated, voted upon, and be passed.

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

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Quarantine Act 1964 has

governed Fiji's quarantine system for almost six decades. The Act contains nine sections, supported by 52 regulations and 21 rules, and has been enforced since 1st January, 1965. The Act is administered by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services. At present, it recognises four seaports – Suva, Lautoka, Levuka, Laucala Bay for seaplanes, and two airports – Nadi and Nausori.

A comprehensive review of the Act has been undertaken since its commencement, despite significant changes in global health regulations, transportation, tourism, and border control practices. I have mentioned this before in the rationale of the review:

- (1) The tourism sector requests updated health clearance fees that have been addressed in the Bill; and
- (2) New ports of entry declared but not legally recognised.

Sir, FRCS has recently declared new ports of entry, but these have not been formally incorporated into the Act. As a result, they cannot legally operate as quarantine' port of entries, and their quarantine procedures lack formal statutory backing. There is the absence of a gazetted anchorage or mooring grounds, and the new port of entries do not have designated quarantine anchorage areas for vessels awaiting pratique. This creates operational challenges and health security risks. I have mentioned the outdated fees and cost recovery mechanisms, and I welcome the comments from the committee in terms of the cost recovery mechanisms as well.

In alignment with international health regulations, the Act predates global regulatory framework such as the World Health Organization's International Health Regulations and it must be updated to ensure Fiji's compliance with core health surveillance capabilities, port of entry public health requirements and international health emergency procedures.

The intended amendments of the Act, in section 2 the updated definition of vessel, in section 3, the appointment of quarantine officers, section 7 on offences and penalties and section 9 disposal and recovery of charges and expenses and raise fixed penalties for non-compliance of \$1,000 to reflect the actual cost of recovery and enforcement requirements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, updating the Quarantine Act 1964 is essential to modernize Fiji's border health system, align national law with international standards, support tourism, maritime sectors and ensure effective and safe operation of new and existing ports of entry.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for bringing the Bill to Parliament on the Quarantine Act, and I think he has spelt out the major features of the Bill. If you look at the Bill in itself, in terms of the red ink, there is not that much change that is in the Bill. So it is not a very large Bill.

Some of the key features of this Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the way in which what it has done. It is expanded the definition of what is covered or the coverage of the Bill, including yachts and superyachts. It has transferred powers from the Minister to the Permanent Secretary, so keeping operational arms within the executive itself.

It has also introduced a system of graduated enforcement to try to make sure that you ensure compliance. Fixed penalty notices leading to fines and higher things, so it gives an opportunity for people to do the right thing. And it also increases penalties for agents and those that fail to comply with the quarantine allegations, Mr. Speaker, Sir. There are a number of very good changes that we have seen in the Bill as it has been presented.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have said before, if there are a number of issues that needs to be covered here, some of the challenges in the Bill that might still need to be looked at into the future is that while the penalties are increased, safeguards would also need to be looked at, especially when you are talking about the minor administrative mistakes that might lead to severe penalties. Criminalising or the failure to pay fixed penalties, if a fixed penalty is not paid, the person becomes criminally liable, so that can also have an escalation for the people that are concerned.

I think in terms of the coverage of the Bill, I think the Bill itself is fairly clear. If there were issues that submitters brought up, it was not about the contents of the Bill itself, but a lot about the way in which it is managed, but those are things that will be covered in process and so forth, about trying to streamline, eliminate duplication, about how the boats are checked and the aeroplanes are checked. So, I think that is the only challenge that is in this particular Bill.

Nevertheless, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in quarantine, there is always your focus in trying to make sure that diseases do not come into the country. At the same time, for the ships and aeroplanes, they want their turnaround time to be fast. So, it is always a question of finding the balance between these two things. I think a lot of the submitters, they did not express a lot of issues with the penalties and so forth, but just the duplication of the process, bringing things together.

There are some suggestions in some countries where the same person does the work of the customs, the health inspection and so forth. It is a way of just streamlining. It is not about matters in the Bill themselves but making sure all these things work together so we can achieve those two in ends; making sure that diseases do not come in, and at the same time, help the companies to succeed. With that, I support the Bill, Sir.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would just like to contribute to the debate on the Act to amend the Quarantine Act. I will just make a very short statement. It is worth repeating that we need to protect Fiji's health, and it is the responsibility of every citizen of this country. Every pest and disease that enters Fiji that threatens our food security, our economy and our way of life unlike the larger nations, we do not have endless resources to eradicate the pests or disease that comes into our country.

There was some incursion of disease, particularly relating to crops a few years back, one of those is fall armyworm which has the potential to devastate maize production in Fiji, and its impact goes beyond the farms. It has reduced sales, affect household income, food availability, et cetera. Also, the incursion that came through our ports in the last few months was *bactrocera facialis* or the Tongan fruit fly. A fruit fly that is endemic to Tonga, poses a severe threat to Fiji's food industry, especially its eggs in a wide range of fruits, causing high yield losses and market rejection. When they were trying to trace this, it was due to the non-supervision of boats that were coming into the country. I think it is quite important that those who are responsible for ensuring boats are checked adequately, so that we do not have quite a lot of incursion of these sort of fruit flies into our country.

The quarantine laws are quite important, and it is very critical that they are updated. So, this Bill modernises our Quarantine Act to reflect today's realities and it ensures decisions are scientifically based and updated to accurately reflect our existing organisational structure and control points. Also, quarantine is not a barrier. It is an enabler. It opens up the markets also for us when we want to export to overseas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this august House will need to acknowledge and put quarantine high on our agenda so as to protect our country, protect our health and our livelihoods, biodiversity and food security. I commend this Bill to the House.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- My apologies, Sir. I thought we had cut the numbers, but in short, we support the Bill.

MR. SPEAKER.- Our last speaker is the honourable Leader of the Opposition.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be very brief. Of course, we do support the Bill, but it is timely as well. There has been a few amendments since 1964, I believe 1970 was one and then in 2010 because of the changing dynamics and the nature of infectious diseases as well.

To be honest, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was confused between the Quarantine law of 1964 and the Biosecurity Act. There are some similarities and perhaps some duplication as well and probably something that we need to consider for the future. There is compartmentalisation and clear demarcation of responsibilities, but probably in some instances, we might need to have omnibus laws, bring some of these together because I think it will also contribute to economising, being cost effective in the way that we do, probably something that needs to be considered.

However, I was confused between the two - the Biosecurity Act and Quarantine Act, but the roles are quite clear. One deals with agricultural and environmental, including pests and other diseases and the Quarantine Act is quite clear. I will not go into the Clauses, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I had a good experience of this during COVID, when NDMO was asked to provide its sea legs, operated by the Navy for the yachts and super yachts, which are now included in this amendment and based in Denarau, where they have to go out. I see Tonga in the gallery. They are well aware of that operation, and I had a bit of experience of this and that is why I strongly support the Bill.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- I thank each and every Member that have contributed in support of the Bill. In summary, Sir, the Bill is very much an important aspect of health care and preventable health care service delivery here in Fiji. Our health inspectors are guidance of the legislation, as rightly said by the honourable Leader of the Opposition. I was hoping that the Standing Committee would experience that as well.

I am not sure if they ever went outside of the port and boarded the ship outside the berthing area, but I am told it is an experience. I was hoping they would have gone, and I would have tagged along, but it is something in the health inspectors that we have, Mr. Speaker, Sir. At the moment, it is dominated by females, and they do these things day in, day out, ensuring that Fiji is safe from quarantine by following the quarantine laws and ensuring that it is implemented.

I also welcome the comments made by honourable Usamate, in terms of the operational aspect of it. Yes, I fully agree with it. All in all, I would like to thank our team through the Ministry of Health, from the health inspectors, the technical team, from their leader, Luke, Mr. Rama, Simeli, Mr. Toga who is sitting in the gallery, Lusi and for some reason, they call themselves *Quruquruvatu*, I do not know why. In addition, I thank the Standing Committee for the role it has played in ensuring that the Bill before us is a bipartisan one.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed too.

[A Bill for an Act to amend the Quarantine Act 1964 enacted by the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji (Act No. of 2025)]

REGISTRATION OF SKILLED PROFESSIONALS (REPEAL) BILL 2025

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Wednesday, 3rd December, I move:

That the Registration of Skilled Professionals (Repeal) Bill 2025 be debated, voted upon, and be passed.

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

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, I rise to support and commend this Bill before us, the Registration of Skilled Professionals (Repeal) Bill 2025, and to lay out the reasons that this repeal is necessary, responsible, and it is in the long-term national interest.

When the Registration of Skilled Professionals Act 2016 was introduced, it was nine years into the reign of the previous administration, who dismantled the Advanced Passenger Information System (APIS), that was established in 2005. Now the Coalition Government is in the process of re-establishing the APIS – 20 years after we had the system, to manage people movement across our borders.

Further, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the movement of skilled peoples, this came after the previous administration's earlier effort to share the overflow of our skills into the Melanesian countries, a move that was squarely rejected by the MSD member-States in 2012, at a meeting at the Tradewinds Hotel in Lami. At that time, the premise was that Fiji had excess skills, and it wanted to offload some of those skills and personnel to the other countries.

Four years later, the Registration of Skilled Professionals Act 2016 argued that Fiji faced acute skills shortages and long delays in processing foreign professionals. The Act then established the Skilled Professionals Evaluation Committee (SPEC) to process applications with a claim that it was a faster pathway for recruitment. It certainly allowed quick assessment and registration of foreign professionals, where domestic expertise was not immediately available.

Somewhere along the line, the location policy that was there to protect local jobs, disappeared. Over the past year, the practical limitations of SPEC system have become very clear. The operation of SPEC had created significant structural and governance issues. The SPEC directives had overridden or bypassed territory professional bodies and government agencies, causing confusion and undermining established registration processes. The Secretariat, run by a single officer, had not been able to sustain the workload of due diligence checks, labour market analysis, professional consultation, and administrative responsibilities. The Government assumed that a centralised body would be more efficient in processing applications.

However, to medical professional bodies and other professional councils and boards, the issue of efficiency is a misnomer to professional boards and councils, as well as the Department of Immigration. The Committee represented the placement of economic interests or businesses and business owners to secure their foreign workers.

The SPEC had the power to overrule professional assessments of their professionals, supersedes people's healthcare protection and safety, as well as for the security of our nation. The Act was framed as being in the national interest, that professionals entering Fiji's workforce meet a certain standard. If the national interest means lowering the standard and discriminate against our own citizens, and open our immigration system to potential abuse by business owners, then the law

had achieved its goal.

The most immediate impact was the purported transfer of authority over initial qualification assessment from the professional boards to the Committee. It now appears that boards and councils no longer directly evaluate foreign qualifications. That was SPEC's responsibility. The Registration of Skilled Professionals Act 2016 had only invested SPEC with the functions in section 6, to identify the need for skilled professionals in specialised fields and evaluate applications of skilled professionals issued directly regarding employment of skilled professionals, provide a mechanism to expedite the registration of skilled professionals of foreigners who have trained outside of Fiji.

These functions are more policy-driven than technical. A major concern has been that the SPEC assessment process, while intended to standardise other professional bodies, the assessment systems had not always delivered the best policy directions which professional bodies could take in the assessment of foreign professionals' applications. Overriding professional bodies decisions by SPEC's assessments have been a persistent issue, increasing the number of professionals working and seeking to work in Fiji and creating confusion for the professional boards and councils. There have also been concerns about the consistency of SPEC's evaluations compared to what the professional boards previously considered acceptable. These issues have been consistently raised by professional bodies, including the Fiji Pharmaceutical Society, Fiji Pharmacy Profession Board, and the Fiji Medical Association, as well as by several government ministries.

As recently as 26th November, that is, nine days ago, the Fiji Pharmacy Profession Board wrote to the Chairperson of the Committee pleading for the standards of Fiji's pharmacy profession. The Board has a legal mandate to regulate pharmacy practice in the public interest and, by extension, to protect the health and safety of the public from harm by persons practising pharmacy in the country.

There were some tests and examinations introduced, and one comment that came up after that was - these candidates are not ready to sit exams this month – we offer time off to candidates to study - given up urgency to begin working, et cetera. The Board advised SPEC that compliance with the Board's condition is not optional and were invited that candidates must take the oral exam on 26th November. The Board cited conditions on temporary practicing licences to prevent pharmacists coming through the Skilled Professional Evaluation Committee on two grounds: temporary licences, and also for them to be able to complete the test by a certain date.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I intend to complete this statement in my reply.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in support of the Bill that is before the House - Registration of Skilled Professionals (Repeal) Bill 2025.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the Ministry of Health, we have been very transparent in acknowledging, yes, there is a shortage of Pharmacists within Fiji but, nevertheless, that is not the reason why, as the honourable Minister for Immigration mentioned yesterday to open another door because in our opinion, it kind of lowers the standard of our practitioners and when you lower the standard, you know that the effect of it goes to the general public.

Just to be brief, the outcome of Registration of Skilled Professionals Act 2016, when it was introduced in past, it had little or no consultation with relevant stakeholders. Just to elaborate the impact furthermore, as the honourable Prime Minister has mentioned, to elaborate the impact of the Act in action since 2016 to-date, none of the foreign Pharmacists who were approved by SPEC since 2016 to practice in Fiji have passed the Board registration examination that our FNU trained pharmacists are required to pass in order to practice in Fiji. In the latest Board Examination held in

2025, none of the six SPEC approved pharmacists who took, sat the oral examination passed. None of the seven SPEC approved pharmacists who set the written examination passed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was also noted that medical doctors who came through the SPEC approval process struggled to practice in Fiji and also found difficulties in getting employment in the public health sector due to their limited scope of skills and expertise. While we acknowledge the intent behind the establishment of the Act and SPEC, the implementation of the Act puts the health of our people at risk from the lack of scrutiny.

We, therefore, support the Bill to repeal the Registration of the Skilled Professional Act 2016.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I start, I would like to, again, declare my interest with regards to this Bill.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the previous Administration and its ...have been replaced, we must not throw the baby out now with the bath water. The necessity that drove the creation of the legislation remain acutely felt across our economy and our Public Service.

Fiji has a persistent and dangerous shortage of skilled professionals. The shortage in critical fields, like specialized healthcare, ophthalmologists, optometrists and pharmacists outside Suva, as mentioned, are not political talking points, they are matters of public health safety. The inability of a Fijian in a remote area, like Taveuni and Ba, to access specialized doctor due to bureaucratic hurdles is a moral failing on our path.

Recently, we had a medical officer from Tavua, I believe, is on record saying that they are lacking staff and professionals who can actually run a health centre. For example, Mr. Speaker, I have been trying to open a retail pharmacy in Levuka and Taveuni, but we just do not have pharmacists in Fiji to work in those remote areas that will be left to become a reality, as locals do not want to go to maritime islands to practice. It is not viable for anyone to pay the amount requested by the local pharmacists, thus leading to citizens in rural areas in getting quality healthcare.

In the public sector, Mr. Speaker, all pharmacies in health centres are operated by pharmacy assistants, not even pharmacists, or forget about being registered pharmacists.

The honourable Minister for Health just spoke about standard. Where is the standard in the health centres when we do not even have pharmacists practicing pharmacy in the health centre or nursing station? We have unqualified professionals, pharmacy assistants are unqualified, they do not have any Degree or Diploma or Certificate, and they are dispensing Schedule IV medication. Schedule IV medications are only supposed to be dispensed by a registered pharmacist on a prescription, but here, we see that we are actually lowering the standard. On the other side, when it comes to the private sector, we are saying that the standard might go down if we actually get graduate pharmacists from overseas to work in the pharmacy.

Previously, the honourable Minister suggested that they are talking about getting pharmacists from India, but pharmacists from India are not even recognized in Fiji. Would we change the law just because we need pharmacists in the public sector? When it comes to the private sector, the industry is told to follow the current archaic law. When it comes to a retail pharmacy, a pharmacy cannot operate without a pharmacist on the premises, but in the public sector, pharmacy assistants are dispensing Schedule IV medication. What happens to patient safety when non-qualified personnel are in health centres and nursing stations? Why has the Pharmacy Professional Board not increased the number of exams in a year? They only hold either one or two.

The Pharmacy graduates are the ones who are paying thousands of dollars to sit for this exam. The Government does not contribute financially to this particular exam, so why can we not increase the number of exams in a year so that we can have more graduate pharmacists coming out as registered pharmacists, who can fill this gap? No one is looking into this, but we are trying to close down SPEC.

These are serious issues that need to be sorted out, and just repealing this Act without changes to other legislation will not make any sense. Similarly, our economy cannot grow without access to specialized engineers, IT professionals, and other highly skilled technical workers. Repealing this Act with an immediate and robust replacement mechanism will only exacerbate the current brain-drain and suppress foreign investment. This is the most critical point.

We cannot simply revert to the status quo. The 2016 Act was a response to the outdated and often protectionist professional legislation that predates our economic realities. I must say this, that the Fiji's pharmaceutical sector is mostly dominated by pharmacists and not pharmacy owners. Pharmacy owners are the ones making investments and providing employment to pharmacists.

Pharmacists will always try to stop pharmacists coming from abroad to work in a pharmacy, while pharmacy owners are the ones trying to invest and expand pharmacy services to rural areas, as I elaborated earlier on. They are trying to be practitioners in terms of their own profession. They know that if pharmacists come from overseas, their pay will go down, there will be high competition, and that is one of the reasons why the Fiji Pharmaceutical Society has always been critical of SPEC.

Professional bodies, while essential for maintaining standards, often became gatekeepers, imposing conditions on qualified foreign expertise. This created a system designed to protect local practitioners rather than prioritising the national need for service delivery.

The mechanism of the Skilled Professional Evaluation Committee that consisted of five Permanent Secretaries was, first, to establish if there is a gap in terms of skills shortage and then was intended to expedite registration to meet urgent needs. The old system meant significant delays that translated into real-world consequences, such as understaffed hospitals and medical centres and stalled infrastructure projects.

Yes, we can have one door with Immigration. After getting approval from SPEC, Immigration can say 'no' to the visa if the individual does not meet immigration requirements. So just because of one clause, we do not need to remove the whole Act.

Therefore, I urge that the Bill should not be repealed in isolation. If the Government is determined to remove the 2016 Act, they have an urgent and immediate obligation to introduce concurrent legislation that addresses the following - retention of expedited process and the urgent review of licensing Acts.

Mr. Speaker, to simply repeal this law is to declare that the skills shortage crisis has been solved, or worse, that we are willing to let it worsen. We must retain the enabling environment while reforming the governance structure to ensure transparency and accountability.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to express my strong support for the repeal of the Registration of Skilled Workers Act 2016 and its related matters. Before I proceed, Sir, I just want to say something on what honourable Maharaj has alluded to. We are not saying that overseas graduates cannot come to Fiji, we are only saying that they go through our established process in recruitment and also in contracted employment in the public sector and also in private sector.

As alluded to by the honourable Minister for Health, numbers have gone through the Board Exam for pharmacists, they all failed, those who came through the SPECS, so that speaks volume. Also, for the Assistant Pharmacists who are working in our public sector, they do not work alone, they work under the supervision of a qualified pharmacist.

I rise today, Mr Speaker, Sir, to support the repeal of the Registration of Skilled Professionals Act 2016 which, as correctly mentioned by the honourable Prime Minister, is a duplicated process that compromised the vital checks and balance that safeguard public safety, protect our national interests and uphold professional integrity. These are not minor issues in the health sector, Sir, they are matters of life and death.

Health professionals, doctors, dentists, nurses, pharmacists, lab scientists, medical imaging technologists, dental lab technicians and oral health practitioners are individuals whose hands directly impact the lives of our citizens. Their competency determines survival, recovery, disability or death. Therefore, rigorous sector-specific vetting is not optional, it is essential and is mandatory.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji already has long established 33 authorities entrusted by this Parliament to regulate these professions - the Fiji Medical and Dental Council, Fiji Nursing Council, Pharmacy Profession Board, Allied Health Professional Council and immigration authorities. These bodies possess the legal mandate, the technical expertise and system necessary to verify qualification, assess competence, uphold ethical standards and license professional practising in Fiji. However, the Registration of Skilled Professionals Act 2016 attempts to create a parallel pathway, essentially a shortcut for skilled professionals to enter Fiji outside of this proper regulatory framework.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, shortcuts in healthcare are dangerous. They open the door to bogus medical, dental and nursing practitioners; individuals with fraudulent and unverified qualifications; professionals who are deregistered or blacklisted in other countries; and people without peer review or any evidence of continuous professional development or competency assessment. One unqualified surgeon in an operating theatre. One fraudulent dentist holding a drill. One untrained nurse administering medications, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the consequences can be catastrophic. It is precisely why regulatory councils exist. They protect the public from such risks, not to be bypassed by another parallel law.

The gaps in the 2016 Act are even more concerning. It neglects the mandatory system of CPDs, peer review and monitoring and evaluation which are all essential for the renewal of their annual practising licence. Globally, CPD and peer review are non-negotiable safeguards. Peer review ensures accountability and CPD keeps professionals current and competent. Monitoring and evaluation guarantee adherence to standards. Without these, we risk our health professionals who are practising outdated techniques, unsafe procedures and unverified clinical judgment, something no health system can afford.

Furthermore, the Act failed to address the regulation of expatriate lecturers that are teaching in our College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Science in the Umanand Prasad Medical School in Saweni, and also the Sangam Institute of Nursing in Labasa. Anyone involved in training for Fiji's health workforce must be properly registered, vetted and subjected to internal policy. We cannot allow unverified individuals to shape our health professionals' future and weakens both the service delivery and the workforce development.

Fiji now need, not emotion, but efficiency within existing statutory council, efficiency in vetting their licence, so, the repealing of the Registration of Skilled Professionals Act 2016 and with its related matters will restore clarity, strengthens our regulatory authority's integrity, safeguards our borders, protects public safety, and reaffirms the authority of the professional bodies established by

this very Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our citizens entrust their lives daily to our health professionals. We must ensure that every individual who touches or treats our Fijians are competent, ethical and fully verified. These are the reasons I strongly and unequivocally support the repeal of the Registration of Skilled Professionals Act 2016 and its related matters.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the motion to repeal this programme to bring in skilled professionals, I have always been a person who believed in standards, making sure that we meet standards, and I think all of us always want fit and proper people in all special skills to be able to provide the service that is needed, whether it is in the medical field or engineering field or any other field. That was always my view about this.

However, there has always also been these big problems of the professional bodies, the slow manner in which they do the things that they are supposed to do in screening the people that have to come to them. Often, as I have known in the brief time that I have in the medical sector and other sectors, that people have their own agenda and a lot of them view the things, “the kind of programmes from the countries that I went to, these qualifications are the only good ones there are.”

That is something that is across the board in all different types of professional bodies, so a lot of them become gatekeepers for bringing people like themselves into the field. Now, it is important for us to get fit and proper people from all agencies. There are mechanisms in Fiji to cross-check qualifications. We have the Fiji Higher Education Qualifications Framework Council. It works with other agencies to be able to vet qualifications.

However, a lot of times when you are relying on these professional bodies, it is obvious sometimes if there is a bigger supply of people in a particular field, the price for that service will go down. So, a lot of them try to keep it amongst themselves. I do not say that it happens all the time, but it does happen.

There is another truth that we have in the country, we do have skills shortages. What do we need? We need people with the right qualifications to be able to come in and to be able to do the job. If those that are tasked with the job of maintaining the standards are looking at it in a particular way, that not might really reflect the competency of the people doing the job, then that needs to be relooked at.

As we have said, in here we are talking about the need for skilled people to be able to do the job, but as it has been pointed out by honourable Maharaj, even in nursing stations, nurses dispense medicine. Even in Health Centres, there are particular medicines that need to be dispensed by pharmacists, are being dispensed by the people that are there.

The honourable Assistant Minister said that there are people whom they work under. Those people might be in the Subdivisional Hospital, they might be in the Divisional Hospital, but they are not there on site, so here we have an example of two standards being applied differently. When we are looking at this, we need to look at all of these different pictures.

If there is gatekeeping going on turf protection and using it and using the idea of the qualifications from ‘this country are not as good as that one’, how can these medical people be able to do that without a formal analysis being done?

One of the worries that we have here, we think it is important that we get the right calibre of people, but we are not too sure that enough work has been done to really look at the figures and how

it has been done and how the qualifications are being looked at. If the standards being used by these professional bodies are saying, “we only accept people that graduated from Fiji, Australia, New Zealand and UK, and we are not accepting people from Vietnam, the Philippines and China”, why is it that, that is the way it is? That needs to be relooked at. Those things need to be looked at objectively, because the people who are making these standards are saying; “only the qualifications from the places that we studied are good enough”, but that is only from their own perception. We need a third party to look at it and make an objective assessment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we believe from our side of the House that this is a move by Government, perhaps, we need time to take it back to the Committee, review, look at all the parameters all around this to make sure that the professional bodies are not being managed by people who are trying to protect their own turf, but at the end of the day, we are also able to address our skills shortage because we do have severe skills shortages in this country, especially at the professional end, and we believe that it might be better to take this back to Committee, give us some time, and if it is found that it is possible to go down this path, then we go. So, along those lines, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not endorse this Bill.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of the Bill before the House, which is to repeal the Registration of Skilled Professionals Act 2016.

Mr. Speaker, this repeal is necessary, amongst other reasons, to protect the integrity of Fiji's immigration system, to strengthen national security and ensure clear and consistent processing of all foreign professionals entering our country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Act was introduced, perhaps, to facilitate skilled migration, however, in practice, it has created legislative duplication, operational confusion and a parallel approval system - another new door, that undermines Fiji's unified immigration governance.

The Act, Mr. Speaker, creates an alternative pathway for foreign professionals to enter Fiji. In this process, applications are evaluated externally by the Committee with decisions made outside the immigration framework, and after the application is assessed by SPEC, the Ministry then receives an email notification to issue the permit. The Ministry does not have access to the information or documents submitted with the application to SPEC. We had to turn one down because the person that they wanted a work permit for was a prohibited immigrant.

The work carried out by SPEC duplicates and sometimes conflicts with the work already undertaken by Immigration, under the Immigration Act 2003 and its regulations. Worse still, Mr. Speaker, Sir, some applications received through the SPEC process, do not meet the mandatory documentary requirements for work permit, and I talked about that medical doctor who was a prohibited immigrant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, repealing the Act will restore a single unified system where all work permit applications are lodged directly with the Ministry of Immigration, which was the case before this Act came in 2016, and this allows the Ministry to fully assess, decide and process applications under the clear authority of the Immigration Act 2003 and its regulations. The unified process means no duplication, stronger security screening and consistent permit standards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to assure those who want to employ skilled professionals, that you still can by lodging your application through the Immigration work permit approval system. Even though the Act existed, we in Immigration have been processing and issuing work permits to medical professionals for private hospitals - Pacific Healthcare, Sai Prema, Oceania, and we also grant exemptions to those medical professionals who come in and work for the Ministry of Health.

So, there you go! You can still apply for foreign professionals through the Immigration Act.

Repealing this Act will not leave a gap. For those who want to employ foreign professionals, there is that line that is available in Immigration, which was there before, and as I have said, we are still even doing that right now by processing the work permits that come through us, and they are now working in our private hospitals and even in our public hospitals.

I support the Bill that is before the House. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Sir, I fully support the Bill.

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to contribute to the debate on the Act to repeal the Registration of Skilled Professionals Bill 2025 (Bill No. 44/2025). I agree with the points raised by the honourable Leader of the Opposition that the Registration of Skilled Professionals Act was introduced when there was a situation of shortage of scarce skills resources. It was a situation when we were trying to master our strategies to handle the increasing staff movement outside the Ministry and outside Fiji. These staff shortages still remain to some degree as we speak, but I am sure different ministries and departments have been handling the situation differently.

Skill shortage has also been felt in Australia and New Zealand, and I have been reliably informed that this is a global trend. I will want to highlight in the House the experiences that I had faced when the Act was introduced in 2016. As a Director for Animal Health and Production then, I had a delegated authority as a Registrar of Veterinary Surgeons under the Veterinary Surgery Act. The Veterinary Surgeons Act, although old, had a schedule that listed all the universities that we can recognise. Only those who graduate from those universities can be registered to practise in Fiji. The purpose of that was to make sure that we employ qualified vets of recognised standards. This is essential so that we can maintain an upward growth in our livestock sector and maintain the disease-free status that we had.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to be very frank, I could not recall if there was any consultation carried out for the Act No. 8, but if there was any consultation made, it did not cover those who would have been affected by the introduction of that Act. The Ministry was not aware of the fact that the Act No. 8 will have those special provisions. What we know was that we started receiving veterinarians who had been registered under Act 8 but had graduated from universities that were not in the schedule of the Veterinary Surgeons Act.

Some Veterinary Degrees have animal husbandry as content of their courses and lack the depth of veterinary knowledge. Some vets will come to our office for registration, and when they cannot meet the requirements, they will simply forward their registration as approved by Act No. 8. Weeks later, we will find those unsuccessful applicants working as veterinarians here in Fiji somewhere. We forwarded our concern and recommendation then for review of their procedures, and we waited for the answer to our concerns. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we did not want to lower our veterinary services in Fiji. We did not want to have new diseases introduced to Fiji because of the risks. We did not want to lose our disease-free status because of trade implications.

We want a thriving livestock sector, and we want a disease-free Fiji. We had worked on strategies to address the shortage of staff in Fiji, and we can provide veterinarians who can register and practise here in Fiji. We started a Vet Course at FNU, and eventually we struggled with the process to recognise the qualification, but we succeeded at last. We now have vets graduate from FNU. We had adopted standards to qualify them for world ratings. Some of our FNU graduates have passed their qualifying exams. We have now registered them, and some of our graduates are working

as vets here and also abroad.

From 2016, there had been big disconnects in the information sharing on those that had been registered and serving in veterinary services. These have been a challenge. The risk is high when it comes to introduce veterinary drugs to Fiji, especially those drugs that contributed to antimicrobial resistance. In repealing Act No. 8 of that year, we will be able to eliminate those risks and maintain our livestock sector. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion before the House.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank all honourable Members for their participation. I thank the honourable Maharaj for elucidating the points of concern to him. Just to assure him that there is a transition period where some of those can be heard. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for Information for the word he used, he said “restore”. That is what we are doing. We are restoring proper statutory authority to professional bodies, a clear role for immigration in issuing work permits, transparent coordination through existing ministries, stronger accountability, and less duplication.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the background to the Bill is very clear in the explanatory notes. I congratulate you on your elevation to be the Chancellor of the University of Fiji. I also congratulate the honourable Naivalurua on becoming the Honorary Colonel of the 3rd Battalion of the Fijian Infantry Regiment. With those comments, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I suggest that the question be now put.

MR. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Votes cast:

Ayes	-	34
Noes	-	10
Not Voted	-	11

Motion agreed to.

[A Bill for an Act to repeal the Registration of Skilled Professionals Act 2016 and for related matters enacted by the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji (Act No. of 2025)]

PUBLIC HEALTH BILL 2025

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Wednesday, 3rd December, 2025, I move that:

The Public Health Bill 2025 be debated, voted upon and be passed.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- I now remind the honourable Members that pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Wednesday, 3rd December, 2025, the debate of the Bill will be limited to one hour.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to make a short contribution on the Bill. The Bill, I believe it is straightforward in terms of the urgency and complement that it be passed which is part of the project of business in NOWFiji, and it seeks the digitisation of building permits, reduces delays and improve transparency and significantly enhances service delivery. It is brought as an urgent Bill because once passed, an amending legislation which

will come into force on 12th December.

I had mentioned yesterday that the overall Bill of the Public Health has been done in terms of the stakeholders' consultation through Public Health. We look forward to that coming through next year, but nevertheless, we have to do this because of the urgency of the matter pertaining to dealing with it within the Public Health Act, and that is why I commend the Bill and support it.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, I rise to speak in support of the Government's necessary and timely initiative to amend the Public Health Act by incorporating provisions, particularly those related to the regulatory oversight power found in section 7 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1946.

The legislative alignment is a critical step towards creating smarter, safer and more sustainable communities in all fields for all Fijians. It is an acknowledgment that public health is not merely a technical matter, but one fundamentally linked to our physical environment and that plan development is essential for a healthy nation. For this reason, Mr. Speaker, I support the motion.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to lend my full support to the Public Health (Amendment) Bill 2025. As far as the Local Government is concerned, as well as the Town and Country Planning, a provision concerned, is to ensure the Land Development Planning Process comes under one Act. It is also in line with section 7 of the Town Planning Act. As alluded to earlier by the honourable Minister, to also assist in the operational licensing of the building permit. The approved system is going to modernise the system as well as prepare us for Fiji's growth. I fully support the Bill before the House.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank each and every one who have contributed in support of the motion. Well, everyone is in support of the motion, so I thank everyone who are here. I commend the motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[A Bill for an Act to amend the Public Health Act 1935 passed and enacted by the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji (Act No. of 2025)]

NATIONAL REFERENDUM BILL 2025

Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the -

- (1) National Referendum Bill 2025 be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (2) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
Bill must be immediately referred to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights;
- (3) Standing Committee must report on the Bill at a sitting of Parliament next year; and
- (4) Upon presentation of a report from the Standing Committee, the Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament with the right of reply given to me as the member moving this motion.

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

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill marks an important milestone in our history and is critical in strengthening democracy by ensuring that the people are heard. Under Section 162(b) of the Constitution of the Republic of Fiji, a referendum must be conducted where a Bill to amend the Constitution of the Republic of Fiji is passed, supported by at least three-quarters of Members of Parliament at the second and third readings.

This requirement, however, was referred by Cabinet to the Supreme Court on the 11th of June this year, pursuant to Section 91(5) of the Constitution. In particular, Cabinet sought the Supreme Court's opinion on whether an amendment proposed would be effective only if approved by the people through a referendum under Section 160 of the Constitution. The Supreme Court, in its opinion, recognised *inter alia* the requirements of Section 162(b) and read down the threshold required for a referendum from three-quarters to two-thirds. It further recognised Section 166 of the Constitution, however, read down the words “three quarters of the total number of registered voters” to “a majority of those registered voters who vote in the referendum”.

Given the Supreme Court's opinion on the requirement to consult on national issues, there remains a gap in this mandate, as there is no dedicated statutory framework available to give effect to any such Constitution or referendum. Mr. Speaker, in essence, there is a lack of a legal framework to guide the conduct, administration and oversight of a referendum. This Bill fills that gap by establishing clear, transparent and accountable processes that will ensure any national referendum is carried out with integrity, order and public confidence.

The proposed National Referendum Bill 2025 will provide the legal framework which can be used to effectively conduct a national referendum. The Bill sets out with precision the circumstances under which a referendum may be called, whether through constitutional requirement or a resolution of Parliament.

The proposed Bill comprises the following pertinent features: conducting a national referendum. The grounds that allow for the conduct of a national referendum are specific to whether section 160 of the Constitution requires a referendum and where Parliament, through a resolution of Parliament, determines that a specific subject matter requires the conduct of a referendum to obtain the views of the general public. Electoral Commission to conduct the referendum is tasked with the conduct of a national referendum. This role is consistent to Section 160 of the Constitution, which requires His Excellency the President to refer the Bill to amend the Constitution to the Electoral Commission to conduct the referendum.

In terms of voting, any person who is registered under the National Register of Voters is eligible to vote. An individual may cast multiple votes, if and when there is more than one issue to vote upon in the referendum. The Fijian Elections Office to facilitate the referendum in accordance with the proposed bill and the Electoral Act 2014 is applicable, including the use of schools as polling stations.

The proposed Bill provides for fair provision in relation to impersonation of voting under a fictitious person, use of undue influence on another person to vote or not vote at a referendum or in case of unlawful assembly and the operation of loudspeakers. The high expenses incurred to effect a referendum are to be defrayed out of the Consolidated Fund.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it empowers the Electoral Commission and the Supervisor of Elections with the necessary authority to administer the process while also ensuring strong safeguards against undue influence, bribery, intimidation and irregularities. The Bill recognises the sanctity of the voting

process by providing for both eligibility, polling procedures, ballot integrity and the publication of official results. It also ensures that no Fijian is disadvantaged in exercising his or her democratic right. Employers must allow a reasonable time off for employees to vote. The polling day must be a public holiday. Polling stations must be accessible, appropriately equipped and supported by presiding officers dedicated to upholding order and fairness. Mr. Speaker, Sir, these measures are consistent with international best practice and reflect a commitment to a free and fair democratic participation.

The Bill also contains essential public order integrity measures prohibiting impersonation, restricting campaign material, preventing undue influence and ensuring that polling environments remain safe, peaceful and free of intimidation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are important protections that guard against interference and uphold the principle that every voter must be able to make a free and informed choice. Furthermore, the Bill provides for the judicious use of public resources, including authority for the Supervisor of Election, to utilise school facilities as polling stations and for rental costs to be met through the Consolidated Fund.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at its heart, the National Referendum Bill 2025 is about deepening democratic governance. It provides an orderly and trusted mechanism through which the will of people may be short on matters of profound national importance. It empowers citizens, protects voters, strengthens institutions, and it ensures that when people of Fiji are called upon to make their voice heard directly, the process is fair, transparent and dignified.

For those reasons, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the National Referendum Bill 2025 to the House.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker. Sir, this Bill does not have anything to do with the Supreme Court's decision. This Bill is a way to try to bring to fruition the requirements of the Constitution and we are glad that it is going to go through Committees, and the committee will do its work. We support the moving of this Bill to the Committees.

MR. SPEAKER.- I presume that was the only contribution from the floor.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the last speaker the last day of 2025, I would like to state that what we have done is basically demonstrate to our supporters, the people of Fiji, that we will implement what we promised them! That is what the other side of the House did not do!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it has been very a successful week for the Coalition Government with the successful passing of six Bills and I want to congratulate the drafting team of the Attorney General's chambers for their hard work over two weeks, the leadership of the Solicitor-General and also the Permanent Secretary of Justice and those who all work towards ensuring that a lot has been achieved. I also acknowledge the printers for the late work they have done, which enabled all the Bills to be printed on time. I want to also thank the honourable Prime Minister, Sir, *vinaka vakalevu na nomuni veiliutaki vinaka*. As we came in this year, they said we are going to last for a few days, but we are still here. In fact, we have made majority, I think come next year half of that House will also come this side.

I want to thank the people of Fiji for their prayers, the prayer warriors that we have maintained steer leadership of this nation in the coming years. *Turaga na Speaker, , vinaka talega vakalevu na nomuni veiliutaki vinaka. Keimami marautaka na nomuni veidigitaki, na nomuni vei qaravi ka keimami marautaka tu edua na yabaki vinaka ni vei qaravi.*

To our families, friends, thank you for your support. We pray that come next year, we hope we will be a fruitful and productive year. Before I resume my seat, I also want to thank everyone and also offer my best wishes for the Christmas and New Year.

MR. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed.

[The National Referendum Bill 2025, moved under Standing Order 51 and referred to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights and to report on the Bill at a sitting of Parliament next year.]

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir - Standing Order 23 on Sitting Days.

MR. SPEAKER.- Sitting days?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Yes, can I get a chance to justify Standing Order 23 on Sitting Days?

MR. SPEAKER.- We are talking about the Bill here? Are they connected to sitting days in the Bill?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- No, on a Point of Order, according to Standing Order 23(1) – Sitting Days.

MR. SPEAKER.- One moment, I will be with you in a minute.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, with all due respect to your Office, we were informed that Friday's sitting is supposed to be cancelled as Opposition Members and everyone in Parliament, including you, Sir, would be invited to the Attorney-General's Conference. Someone lied to you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as none of us Opposition Members have received any invitation for tomorrow.

Just to bring to your attention that as agreed to in the Business Committee and as confirmed by you, Sir, that all the Opposition Members were going to receive their invitation; no invitation came through and as a clarification, I am just letting you know that this is what has transpired with regards to tomorrow's sitting. With those words Mr. Speaker, Sir, on behalf of the Opposition, as the last Member speaking now, I wish everyone a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you. We will take note of that Point of Order.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I did not make that assurance, unfortunately. If that is the case, then I invite you all. As we are about to close, currently all the staff are in Denarau. It is an open invitation. Please attend the AG's Conference.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I am terribly sorry, I seem to be caught in the middle of a storm here. The Business Committee did touch on that subject, I know that. And there was some assurance. I take it upon myself that I did assure, that the invitation was going to come through to the Members. All the Members, whether it was all the Members of the Committee or the whole

of Parliament, was going down to the conference but it is good to hear that the verbal invitation has been issued tonight.

ADJOURNMENT

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

That Parliament adjourns until Monday, 16th February, 2026 at 10.00 a.m.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings us to the conclusion of our sitting for this sitting period. I extend my sincere gratitude to each and every one of you for your valuable contributions throughout this week and during the third session of Parliament.

For your information, Parliament will be prorogued on Monday, 8th December. This is not a sitting day, and by tradition, prorogation marks the formal conclusion of a Parliamentary session or year, with a four-year Parliamentary term.

The Speaker will notify His Excellency the President of the prorogation and of the forthcoming State Opening of Parliament. As honourable Members are aware, His Excellency the President will deliver an Address on the Opening of Parliament. Once Parliament is prorogued, all Parliamentary business, including sittings and Standing Committee proceedings on Bills, motions and reports will be suspended until the commencement of the new session. The only exceptions will be matters deemed urgent and necessary, which will have the approval of the Speaker.

Since this is our final sitting for this session for 2025, first I wish to thank each and every one of you honourable Members for your support and your patronage of the Office of the Speaker in the last year. I rarely concede that I may not have seen eye to eye with some of the honourable Members on both sides of the House on some matters or issues in the course of the year, but as the saying goes, it is in the nature of the beast. This Office, I suggest, would not exist if there are always agreement and unanimity amongst the leaders on any issue that confronts the nation. Be that as it may, I remain grateful that you, the honourable Members, have helped me greatly in discharging the duties of this Office for 2025.

I thank the honourable Prime Minister and honourable Members who have expressed sentiments on my recent appointment yesterday. As I said, this is our final sitting for this session, I take the opportunity to wish all honourable Members and your families, those seated in the gallery and those following the live proceedings, and indeed everyone in Fiji and our diaspora all over the world, as well as our friends, a Merry Christmas and a prosperous New Year in 2026.

I now declare Parliament adjourned until Monday, 16th February, 2026 at 10.00 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 9.30 p.m.

ANNEXURE I

Reply to Written Question No. 345/2025 tabled by the honourable Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation (Ref. Page 2805)



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

Reply to Question No. 345/2025 is as follows:

1.0 VISITOR ARRIVALS

- 1.1 The total visitor arrivals for the year 2025 (January to October) stands at 823,409, an increase of 0.14 percent compared to the same period last year.
- 1.2 Fiji's top three source markets remain Australia, New Zealand, the United States of America (USA), collectively accounting for approximately 80 percent of total visitor arrivals to Fiji in 2025 to-date.
- 1.3 The breakdown of visitor arrivals in the year 2025 is highlighted in Table 1.

	AUSTRALIA	NEW ZEALAND	USA	CANADA	UNITED KINGDOM	CONTINENTAL EUROPE	JAPAN	SOUTH KOREA	CHINA	INDIA	HONG KONG	REST OF ASIA	PACIFIC ISLANDS	OTHERS	TOTAL
January	35,430	12,373	7,325	1,467	1,093	2,928	571	118	2,570	310	135	818	5,201	455	70,794
February	17,812	8,626	7,297	1,492	996	2,141	708	90	2,013	397	49	966	6,632	264	49,483
March	26,434	10,885	10,276	1,950	1,033	2,447	882	120	2,040	379	29	1,398	5,690	279	63,842
April	39,737	17,424	8,429	1,601	1,010	2,336	377	109	2,127	378	124	1,171	5,179	361	80,363
May	38,632	19,613	11,418	1,889	1,175	2,882	555	177	2,377	688	5	1,248	5,432	496	86,587
June	40,903	24,897	12,588	1,490	960	2,208	666	153	2,280	548	101	1,473	4,042	384	92,693
July	44,972	25,311	12,226	1,968	1,373	2,868	730	143	2,860	343	24	1,375	4,650	468	99,311
August	41,786	26,431	11,898	1,865	1,614	3,926	1,437	207	3,208	472	94	1,445	4,866	488	99,737
September	44,187	22,821	8,906	1,515	935	2,767	749	120	2,650	391	71	1,243	5,509	480	92,344
October	41,288	20,323	9,375	1,713	1,095	3,021	701	201	2,392	424	102	1,687	5,561	372	88,255
	371,181	188,704	99,738	16,950	11,284	27,524	7,376	1,438	24,517	4,330	734	12,824	52,762	4,047	823,409

Note : 1. As from January 2011, Hong Kong and India were separated from Rest of Asia, while Taiwan was included; 2. [p] provisional, [r] revised
Source: Fiji Immigration Department

% Share	45%	22.9%	12.1%	2.1%	1.4%	3.3%	0.9%	0.2%	3.0%	0.5%	0.1%	1.6%	6.4%	0.5%	
% Difference	-0.94%	-2.96%	10.75%	1.80%	10.67%	5.84%	-11.01%	-20.24%	-8.25%	-8.78%	1.80%	-0.90%	3.72%	-0.76%	0.14%

2.0 FIJI TOURISM POLICY 2025-2035 STRATEGIES

- 2.1 The Fiji Tourism Policy 2025-2035 ('the Policy') serves as the central guiding instrument for tourism, governance, helping align sector priorities with national planning instruments such as Fiji's National Sustainable Tourism Framework 2024-2034 ('NSTF') and the National Development Plan 2025-2029 and Vision 2050 ('NDP').
- 2.2 The Policy, led by the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation ('MTCA' or the 'Ministry'), further offers conceptual direction and practical considerations for the development of a Tourism Act.
- 2.3 The Policy applies nationally to all tourism-relation activities in Fiji, including the planning, development, management, and regulation of the sector. It covers government agencies, industry, and other stakeholder groups engaged in tourism, as well as domestic, regional and international organisations. The Policy will guide

actions from its endorsement until 2035, providing the framework for tourism legislative reform and development and implementation of a national sustainable tourism standards program.

3.0 **POLICY PILLARS**

3.1 Aligned to the Vision and Action Plan of the NSTF, the following are key pillars of the Policy:

- Pillar 1: Regulatory Coherence and Institutional Governance – Strengthen the legislative, institutional, and regulatory frameworks that enable responsible tourism growth, investor confidence, and sustainable outcomes.
- Pillar 2: Fiji Tourism Standards Framework – Introduce Fiji Tourism Standards for Tourism Enterprises in line with Global Sustainable Tourism Council, Pacific Sustainable Tourism Standards (‘PSTS’) for Destinations (‘PSTS-D’) and Industry (‘PSTS-I’).
- Pillar 3: Inclusive Participation and MSME Empowerment – Create conducive pathways for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (‘MSMEs’), Indigenous Fijians, women and youth.
- Pillar 4: Environment and Climate Resilience – Build environmentally responsible, culturally rich and climate-resilient tourism destinations.
- Pillar 5: Marketing, Innovation and Creative Industries – Grow demand and diversify offerings through innovation, digital transformation and creative experiences.
- Pillar 6: Destination Planning and Management – Guide the spatial and strategic development of tourism across Fiji through integrated planning, infrastructure coordination, and land use strategies that respect community and environmental needs.
- Pillar 7: Tourism Investment and Incentives – Provide a clear investment framework that encourages green and inclusive investments while introducing fiscal and tax incentives for sustainable and renewable energy adoption and the Fiji Tourism Standards Framework.

4.0 **STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINED GROWTH AND DIVERSIFIED MARKETS**

The below provides for a brief on key initiatives being undertaken or expected in line with the Policy to promote sustainable growth and diversified markets:

4.1 Pillar 1: Regulatory Coherence and Institutional Governance

- There is currently no unified policy or legislative instrument governing the entire tourism sector. A series of laws, such as the Hotel and Guest Houses Act of 1973, and the Environmental Management Act of 2005 amongst others, contain tourism-relevant provisions but lack coherence and integration.
- Moreover, the regulatory environment needs to be modernised to manage emerging issues and opportunities such as digital disruptions and innovations, land and tenure complexities, sustainable financing, cultural preservation and commodification, and climate resilience.
- Following the endorsement of the Policy, the Ministry has commenced work on the drafting of Fiji’s first Tourism legislation. A Joint Working Group also has been established to oversee the law.

4.2 Pillar 2: Fiji Tourism Standards Framework

- In line with the Policy, a Fiji Tourism Standards Guidance Framework to develop Fiji's law has been established.
- Under the legislation, the MTCA seeks to gain clear authority to regulate standards, certify enterprises, oversee compliance, and administer supporting mechanisms. This represents a decisive shift from fragmented, outdated systems to a modern, fit-for-purpose approach.

4.3 Pillar 3: Inclusive Participation and MSME Empowerment

- **Dedicated Tourism MSME Fund:** The MTCA launched a pilot Tourism Micro and Small Enterprise Fund – the first of its kind – to give small tourism-businesses (guesthouses, small tour operators, community-based tourism providers, cultural-heritage operators, etc) access to finance via grants. This not only provides access to finance but encourages entrepreneurship and diversified tourism offerings.
- **Partnerships with Broader MSME Support Institutions:** The MTCA has ramped up its efforts to provide support in training, mentorship and capacity building through provision of initiatives such as Tour Guide Training with Rosie Holidays, Tourism Business Continuity and Resilience with Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation, Financial Literacy with MSME Fiji and so forth.
- Under the Farm to Fork initiative, the Ministry also led key workshops around Fiji to strengthen synergy between farmers, fishersfolk, chefs and hotel procurement officials.

4.4 Pillar 4: Environment and Climate Resilience

- The Ministry has begun key policy and institutional initiatives such as the establishment of the Tourism Risk Management Team with key government and industry stakeholders.
- The Ministry is also developing frameworks such as the Tourism Crisis Communications Framework and Tourism Risk Management Framework.
- The Ministry and the United Nations Development Programme Pacific Office in Fiji also entered into a new partnership aimed at enhancing resilience in Fiji's tourism sector. Support includes embedding two government positions dedicated to capacity building, strengthening community-based tourism and facilitating the implementation on NSTF, with a focus on risk-informed strategies.

4.5 Pillar 5: Marketing, Innovation and Creative Industries

- Under Tourism Fiji, Fiji continues to support the marketing and branding of Fiji's national brand – "Fiji where happiness comes naturally".
- Under the Pilot Tourism MSE Fund and Tourism Fiji's Events Development Fund concerted efforts are made to uplift creative industries such as handicraft, traditional performances and agri-tourism enterprises.
- Partnerships such as that with the National Trust of Fiji has also allowed pathways to revive heritage attractions such as the Suva Heritage Panels.

4.6 Pillar 6: Destination Planning and Management

- In line with Pillar 6, the Ministry aims to play a more central role in integrated tourism planning. As an example, through the Na Vualiku project, an Integrated Tourism Master Plan (ITMP) is being led by the Central Project Management Unit. The ITMP is a 25-year strategic framework to develop sustainable and resilient tourism by focussing on infrastructure, community benefits and environmental sustainability in the region. The project's goal include upgrading airports, improving roads, supporting local businesses, and creating a coordinated approach to tourism management.
- The Ministry envisages a similar approach to sustainably growing other new regions for Tourism. Notably, the Ministry is coordinating a joint visit to Lau to explore tourism potential in the Lau Group of Islands.

4.7 Pillar 7: Tourism Investments and Incentives

- Under the Fiji Tourism Standards Framework, the Ministry will be exploring additional incentives that promote sustainable tourism development.

ANNEXURE II

Reply to Written Question No. 346/2025 tabled by the honourable Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation (Ref. Page 2805-2806)

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

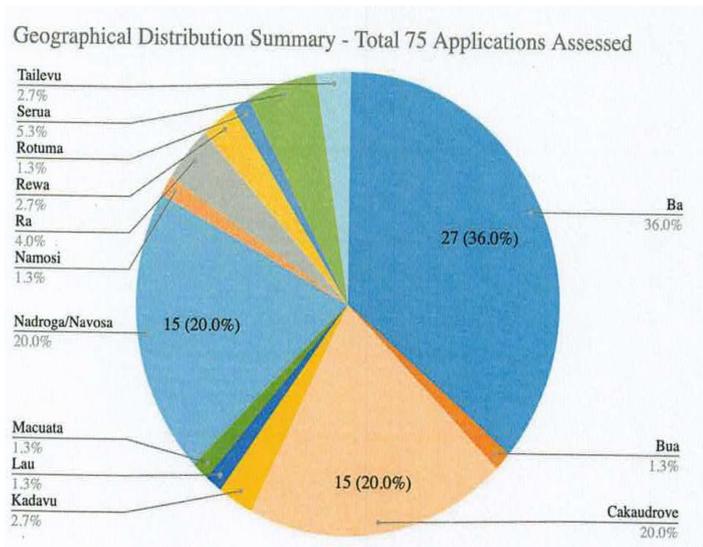
Reply to Question No. 346/2025 is as follows:

1.0 Background

- 1.1 A key driver of economic growth is Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises ('MSMEs'). Given their dominance in the tourism sector, support for their long-term recovery and expansion is critical to creating high-quality visitor experiences and facilitating community benefits from tourism.
- 1.2 Some data suggests up to 80 percent of the sector comprises SMEs – highlighting the prevalence of SMEs in the sector and the growing need for a structured support system that can optimise productivity and impact.
- 1.3 The Pilot Micro and Small Enterprise (MSE) Fund aims to support and empower tourism micro and small enterprises by providing financial assistance in the form of grants. It will focus on creating diversified tourism products and experiences.
- 1.4 In the 2024-2025 and 2025-2026 financial years, the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation was allocated \$400,000 respectively in budget support to pilot the programme. Implementing the programme as a Pilot was to ensure the Ministry is able to roll it out in a manner which builds on longer-term sustainability and impact of access to finance programmes of Government.
- 1.5 Business that fall under the "micro" category were eligible to apply for grants of up to \$15,000. "Small" businesses were eligible to apply for grants up to \$25,000.

2.0 Key Application Highlights for Financial Year 2024-2025

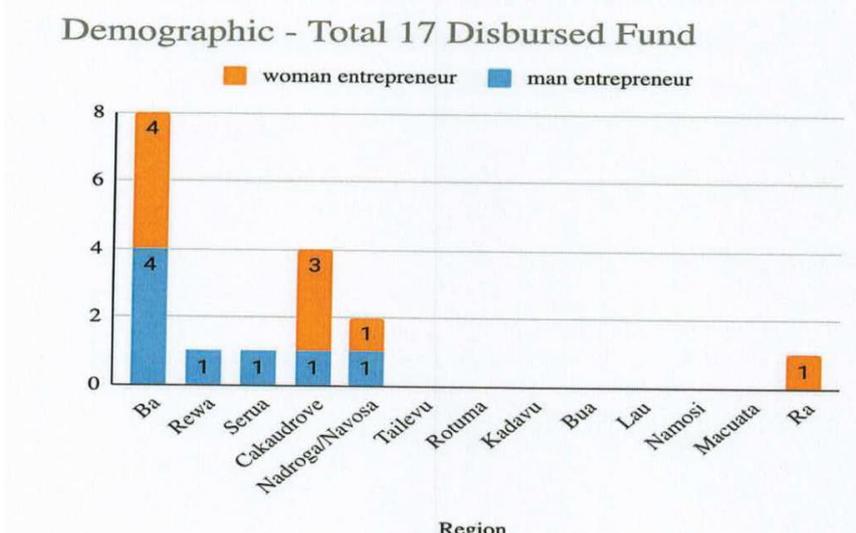
- 2.1 The Pilot was launched on 4 December 2024 through Expression of Interest and closed on 28 March 2025.
- 2.2 A total of 75 applications were received. The geographical and demographic distribution of applicants are outlined in the charts below:

Chart 1: Geographical Distribution Summary

- 2.3 The majority of applicants came from the Ba Province, which is expected given its role as a tourism hub, accounting for 36 percent of total submissions. This was followed by Cakaudrove (21 percent) and Nadroga/Navosa (19 percent), the tourism interests are concentrated in more developed or tourism-active provinces. It potentially reflects the need for targeted outreach and support to encourage participation from underrepresented regions in future funding rounds.
- 2.4 Applications reflected a strong mix of tourism-related sectors, with the highest interest in tour operations and homestay accommodations. Other key sectors included marine transport, culture and heritage, and adventure tourism, alongside niche sub-sectors such as agritourism, and the creative arts.
- 2.5 The majority of applicants (65 percent) are classified as micro business, while 32 percent fall under the small business category. Medium-sized businesses are not eligible for the Pilot MSE Fund.
- 2.6 Out of the 75 applications received, 38.67 percent were submitted by women entrepreneurs.

3.0 2024-2025 Benefitted Applicants

- 3.1 In the first batch of assessments, 24 applicants were shortlisted applications, of which 19 projects were approved for funding by the Selection Panel, with a total pilot contribution of \$293,686.
- 3.2 The geographical and demographic distribution of fund recipients is illustrated in the chart below. Of the 19 approved applicants, 17 businesses have received disbursements to date, 47 per cent are led by women entrepreneurs. Two (2) businesses requested an extension to their one-third contribution due to time constraints and changes in supplier availability or internal fund allocations. These two applicants' funding will be disbursed in the 2025-2026 financial year.

Chart 2: Demographic & Geographic Distribution Summary

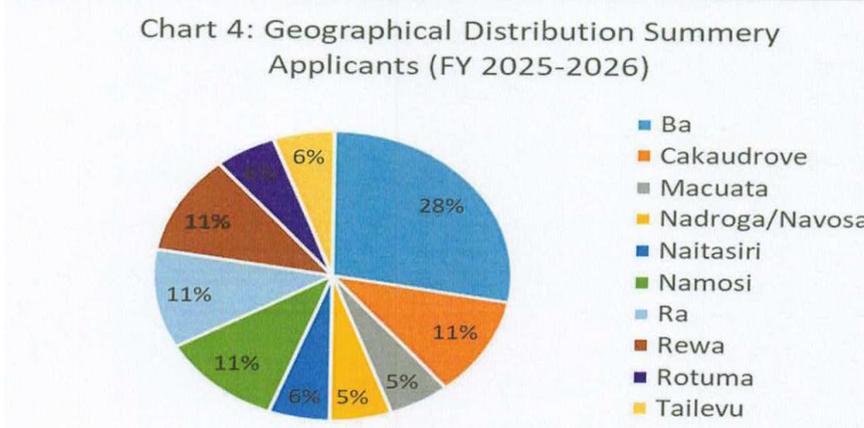
3.3 The second Selection Panel meeting assessed 16 shortlisted applications under Batch 2. Of these, 11 projects were approved, 2 applications were placed on hold pending further information, and 3 applications were not supported.

3.4 Thus, a total of 13 approved projects were carried forward and scheduled for disbursement in this financial year 2025-2026. The geographical distribution of fund recipients is illustrated in the chart below.

4.0 Key Application Highlights For Financial Year 2025-2026

4.1 The Pilot was launched on 4th August, 2025 through Expression of Interests and closed on 30th September, 2025.

4.2 A total of 33 applications were received. The geographical and demographic distribution of applicants are outlined in the chart below.

Chart 4: Total Application Geographic Distribution Summary for 2025-2026

4.3 Although the number of grant applications has decreased compared to last financial year, the applications received this year show an overall improvement in quality and document readiness. This may be attributed to the fact that the majority of applicants (58 percent) are classified as small businesses, which tend to be more business-ready.

- 4.4 Most applications were received from the Ba Province, consistent with last year, accounting for 27.3 percent of total submissions. This was followed by Cakaudrove, Namosi, Rewa and Ra (11 percent). This distribution reflects that tourism interests remain concentrated in more developed or tourism-active provinces. At the same time, there is some growth from underrepresented regions, although these areas may still require further awareness activities or may not yet be fully ready for tourism engagement.
- 4.5 This year's applications also showed growth in adventure-based tourism, particularly diving, and continued to demonstrate a strong mix of tourism-related sectors such as accommodation and tours. Other key sectors included marine transport and culture & heritage tours.
- 5.0 2025-2026 Benefitted Applicants
- 5.1 A total of 18 shortlisted applications were presented to the Selection Panel on 24 November, 2025. Of these, 9 projects were approved, with total project costs of \$267,420 and a Pilot contribution of \$167,193. In addition, 7 applications received conditional approval, pending further verification.
- 5.2 A further 13 projects approved under Batch 2 of the 2024-2025 financial year were carried forward into this financial year, with a total Pilot contribution of \$182,775.
- 5.3 In total, \$349,968 has now been committed to approved applicants from the \$400,000 allocation. This leaves a balance of \$50,032, which will be reserved for the 7 conditionally approved applications.
- 5.4 The remaining balance will be used to fund the conditionally approved projects. However, depending on the number of applications ultimately approved, disbursements for this financial year may exceed the allocated budget. Any approvals beyond the current allocation will be carried forward and funded in the next financial year.
- 6.0 Eligibility Criteria
- 6.1 To be eligible, MSEs must be:
- Fijian citizens of 18 years of age and above;
 - An existing registered enterprise in operation for two years;
 - Registered entity must be majority Fijian owned (at least 51 percent);
 - Engaged in tourism and where a majority share of revenue comes from the tourism sector including tour operators, activity providers, ground operators, hospitality, food and beverage and transportation; and
 - Ability to meet the one-third cash funding project cost with support documents satisfactory to the Ministry.
- 6.2 The Pilot provided grant funding for the purchase and construction of capital projects as well as operational items. This includes, but is not limited to:
- Improvement of products and experiences (including virtual, land and marine experiences);
 - Visibility and awareness such as website upgrade;
 - Adoption of technology to enhance visitor experiences;

- Amenities enhancements such as visitor areas or signage;
- Small-scale infrastructure such as trails, signage; and
- Equity funding with financial institutions for capital expenditure and diversification purposes. Relevant Fis compliance and requirements will apply.

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

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

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

7.0 Conclusion

7.1 The utilisation of funds this year is expected to exceed the allocated budget, the programme has demonstrated strong effectiveness. Across both financial years, recipients have included a diverse range of enterprises such as village tours, homestays, agri-tourism ventures, creative arts, and marine tour operators.

7.2 The Fund directly supports the Government's objectives of growing Fiji's tourism sector by expanding participation, improving product quality, strengthening supply chains, and enhancing resilience across the visitor economy. It acts as a targeted catalyst to unlock the potential of micro and small operators – who form the backbone of Fiji's tourism offering, especially in rural and maritime areas.

7.3 Through this grant and the Ministry's joint efforts to support MSE business, more than 50 percent of applicants and recipients have participated in Business Continuity training, business literacy training, tour guide training and digital skills training. These opportunities have enabled businesses to improve their operational skills, strengthen sustainability, enhance risk awareness, and build networks with other MSEs.

7.4 The Ministry public two awareness videos for applicants, which also provided marketing exposure for the featured businesses.

7.5 Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) are underway to more effectively assess the impact of the programme.