PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

MONDAY, 13TH JULY, 2026

[CORRECTED COPY]

C O N T E N T S

MONDAY, 13TH JULY, 2026

The Parliament met at 9.35 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present except the honourable Minister for Education 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 Friday, 26th June, 2026, 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 honourable Members to today's meeting. I also welcome those joining us in the gallery, and those watching the live proceedings on television and the internet. Thank you for your interest in this week's National Budget debates.

Honourable Members, please, join me in welcoming honourable Tania Rattray, an Independent Member of the Legislative Council of the Tasmanian Parliament. You are most welcome to the Fijian Parliament, and we wish you a productive stay here in Fiji.

Response to Written Questions

For the information of honourable Members, the Secretariat has received the following responses to Written Questions, as follows:

(1) from the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Civil Service, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics to Written Question 38 of 2026 asked by honourable Premila Kumar;

(2) from the honourable Minister for Finance, Commerce and Business Development to Written Questions 109 and 110 of 2026 asked by honourable Jone Usamate; and Written Questions 25, 81, 82, 96, 107 and 122 of 2026 asked by honourable Premila Kumar.

Honourable Members, responses have been conveyed to the respective honourable Members and copies are made available on the Parliament website.

For further information of all honourable Members, please, be advised that at its meeting on Tuesday, 23rd June, 2026, the Business Committee reached a unanimous decision on the following matters:

(1) the Shadow Minister for Finance in delivering his response to the Budget Address, will speak for the same length of time as the honourable Minister for Finance, which in this case being 2 hours and 22 minutes;
(2) to exempt the honourable Minister for Finance from the ordinary speaking time limitations for his Right of Reply on Wednesday, 15th July, 2026;
(3) all remaining honourable Members will have 20 minutes to respond to the Budget Address;
(4) Parliament will sit extended hours into the evenings this week;
(5) Parliament will take limited breaks including lunch and dinner at the discretion of the Speaker;
(6) in the event, business for any given day is concluded earlier than scheduled, that business may be brought forward accordingly, and vice versa. If business is delayed, it may be carried over to the next day, as appropriate.
(7) the speaking time provisions will be suspended during the debate on the Consequential Bills on Friday, 17th July, 2026; and
(8) as is the ongoing practice, Parliament sittings for June and July will be dedicated only to Budget-related business and select urgent matters.

Finally, the Business Committee has unanimously approved that the votes taken during the Committee of Supply stage with respect to Supplementary Expenditure Groups (SEGs), Programmes, Activities, each respective Heads, Schedules 1 and 2 and Clauses 1, 2 and 3 will be conducted through acclamation. However, the vote on the Third Reading of the Appropriation Bill will be conducted electronically. Honourable Members are kindly requested to take note of these voting arrangements.

DEBATE ON THE 2026-2027 APPROPRIATION BILL 2026

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

> That a Bill for an Act to appropriate a sum of Four Billion, Two Hundred Thirty Seven Million, Seventy Three Thousand, Two Hundred and Fifty Two Dollars for the ordinary services of Government for the year ending 31st July, 2027 (Bill No. 13 of 2026), be read a second time.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I second the motion.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will not make a speech this morning and will keep my comments for my Right of Reply on Wednesday this week.

MR. SPEAKER. - Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate. We will first hear the response from the Shadow Minister for Finance, after which we will continue with the order of the speakers as listed on the Batting Order.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of the House, members of the public in the gallery, and those listening in via livestream; *ni sa bula vinaka saka* and a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to respond to the 2026-2027 National Budget with a deep sense of responsibility to the people of Fiji, whose aspirations, concerns, and expectations we are privileged to represent in this august House.

At the outset, I wish to acknowledge and thank the honourable Minister for Finance for the presentation of the 2026-2027 National Budget. Preparing a national budget is a significant undertaking, requiring difficult decisions in balancing competing priorities within a challenging global and domestic economic environment. It must be especially challenging for the honourable Minister, having been in office for only the last eight months, and I commend the honourable Minister for that.

I also acknowledge, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the dedication of public servants, economists, technical officers, and all those who contributed to the preparation of this Budget. That includes members of the public who made the effort to offer their views during the budget consultation process.

As I stand before the House today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to respond to the National Budget Address, my role as Leader of the Opposition is to recognise the positive measures contained within the Budget where they exist. More importantly, I will endeavour to identify areas where further attention, stronger implementation, and more ambitious reforms may be required.

This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is not a matter of politics. It is a matter of responsible parliamentary scrutiny. It is the duty of this House to ensure that this Budget supports sustainable economic growth, strengthens fiscal responsibility, improves public services, creates opportunities for our young people, supports businesses, protects the vulnerable, and builds resilience against future challenges. Above all, it must improve the everyday lives of ordinary Fijians.

As I stand to offer my response to the Budget this morning, I am reminded that behind every allocation is a family hoping for a better future, a student striving for an education, a farmer working the land, a business owner creating jobs, a health worker caring for patients and a young person seeking an opportunity. These are the people we serve, Mr. Speaker, Sir. They expect thoughtful leadership, responsible decision-making and constructive debate. They expect us to rise above division and work together for the good of the nation and the people.

On the Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Budget is more than just a statement of revenue and expenditure - it is a reflection of Government priorities, its vision for the country's future and its commitment to improving the lives of all Fijians. It is through this Budget that we assess how opportunities will be created and how the challenges confronting our people will be mitigated.

This Budget is presented at a time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when Fiji stands at an important point in its development. Our economy has made some progress since the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Tourism has recovered strongly, businesses have reopened, employment has improved, and economic confidence is gradually returning. Yet, recovery alone does not guarantee long-term gains.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many Fijians continue to face rising living costs. Young people continue to seek meaningful employment. Businesses require greater certainty to invest and expand. Farmers face climate-related challenges. Healthcare systems continue to experience technical and workforce challenges and Government must manage the high levels of public debt while continuing to invest in essential public services. Mr. Speaker, Sir, these realities remind us that while progress has been made, significant work remains.

On some initial observations, Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the last four fiscal years, including this year, Government had allocated a total of $18.5 billion in national budgetary allocations. That represented Government's total national spending in the current term of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the least I would have expected are some indications of how those funds have been utilised, and the returns derived from the utilisation of those funds, especially on capital projects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had stated before that our budgets are output-oriented and very little attention is given to outcomes, which are the impacts the utilisation of budgets have on our people and our national economy. These outcomes must be factored as Key Performance Indicators (KPI) for those responsible for utilising and managing those funds.

Just as important, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am aware that a number of major Government projects, funded through the National Budget, have faced implementation delays over the years. Some are still yet to be implemented. I am of the view that this House, being the authority for the allocation of national budgets, must be informed of delays to projects, at least, those funds funded by the Government's Public Sector Investment Programmes (PSIPs).

This is important, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as delays in the implementation of projects could mean delays in service delivery to the people. These too must be tied to the KPIs of the Heads of Entities, tasked with the implementation of those projects, as a lot of delays are attributed to poor planning on the part of those responsible.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it would have been good if this House was informed of the percentage of our national budget allocations that were utilised annually in the last four years, and the reasons for any underutilisation of funds. This should help to improve efficiency in the annual budget utilisation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another matter that deserves greater transparency is the extent of virements and the redeployment of funds during the financial year. Parliament approves appropriations for specific Ministries and Programmes based on priorities presented in this House. Where substantial amounts are subsequently transferred from one Ministry or Programme to another, Parliament and the public deserve to know why those changes became necessary.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it would have been logical as well if some indications were given on how far our national budget was linked to the National Development Plan, as it rightly should. This is critical to ensure that the aspirations of the National Development Plan are progressed.

On the National Economic Overview - Global Economic Environment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will agree that our national economy is inextricably linked to the global economy through trade, tourism, investment, remittances, and development cooperation. What happens in the major economies of the world inevitably affects the livelihoods of our people, the performance of our businesses, and the fiscal position of Government. The geopolitical tensions in certain parts of the world are a case in point.

The global economy today remains resilient but uncertain, while inflation has ceased in many advanced economies. Mr. Speaker, Sir, compared with the sharp increases in recent years, growth remains uneven. Slower growth in major economies can affect demand for Fiji's export and influence investment decisions. For Fiji, the health of the economies of Australia and New Zealand is especially significant, being our largest trading partners and major tourism markets. Strong employment and economic conditions in those countries generally support higher visitor arrivals, stronger remittance flows, and increased business confidence in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another of the key factors that have shaken our economy to the core in recent times is the volatility of the global energy markets. We are reliant on the global fuel markets. When international oil prices rise, transport costs increase, electricity generation becomes more expensive, and businesses face higher operating costs. These costs are eventually passed on to the consumer through higher prices for goods and services, and it is the most vulnerable within our communities that are affected the most.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, similarly, fluctuations in global food prices affect the cost of imported staple and agricultural inputs, such as fertilizer, animal feed, and machinery. These pressures reinforce the importance of strengthening domestic food production, improving agricultural productivity, and supporting food security.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the global economic environment presents both risks and opportunities to our local economy. While we cannot control international markets and geopolitical events, we can strengthen our resilience through sound fiscal management, economic diversification, investment in human capital, and effective governance.

Our task is to ensure that this Budget prepares us not only to respond to global uncertainties, but also to seize new opportunities. That should be our priority as we consider the Budget that is before the House. A resilient economy is one that can withstand external shocks, protect the most vulnerable, and continue to create opportunities for our future generations.

On Fiji's economic outlook, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there have been some encouraging development in our economy since the disruptions of COVID-19. After experiencing a severe contraction of 17.29 percent during the height of COVID-19, it has rebounded strongly since the opening of our borders in late 2021. Since then, our growth rate had moderated at around 3.5 percent in 2024, and continued in 2025, underpinned by tourism recovery and remittance inflows.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, amid the global geopolitical tensions and the disruption to the global oil supply, our economic growth is projected to slow to 1.5 percent this year from an earlier projection of 3 percent. This, however, is expected to gradually recover to around 3 percent in 2027. While the outlook for our economy is positive, albeit cautiously, it is also accompanied by challenges that require prudent economic management and long-term planning.

What is quite evident, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with our past experiences, is that we cannot continue to rely too heavily on a single industry, tourism, in our case. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how quickly external shocks can disrupt tourism, reinforcing the need to diversify our economic base.

Mr. Speaker Sir, economic diversification must, therefore, remain central amongst our priorities. Greater investments in our primary industries, manufacturing, renewable energy, financial services and the blue economy will strengthen resilience and create for us a broader economic base.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a more diversified economy is better equipped to withstand global uncertainties and generate sustainable long-term growth. That means that diversifying the economy, investing in areas where real growth potential lies, supporting innovation and maintaining fiscal discipline will foster economic growth and improving the livelihoods of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we remain committed to these priorities, we can look forward to the future with confidence – not because challenges have disappeared, but because we have the opportunity and the determination to overcome them. Sir, that is the economic future to which we should all aspire.

On fiscal responsibility and public debt, Mr. Speaker, Sir, fiscal responsibility is one of the cornerstones of good governance and sound economic management. It is about ensuring that government finances are managed prudently so that today's needs are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs.

The current Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, continues to prioritise investment in education, healthcare, infrastructure, social protection and economic development. These are development priorities, but they are being pursued at a time when we continue to face elevated levels of public debt and a sizable fiscal deficit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the current Budget, Government projects a fiscal deficit of approximately $1 billion, equivalent to around 7 percent of our Gross Domestic Product (GDP), while the total public debt remains at approximately 85 percent of the GDP. These figures highlight the importance of maintaining a credible medium-term strategy for fiscal consolidation while supporting economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will all acknowledge that our national debt increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The collapse of tourism, declining Government revenue and the need to protect businesses, workers and essential public services required extraordinary fiscal intervention. Borrowing during that period helped prevent a deeper economic crisis and supported our national economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the return of our economy to more normal conditions, fiscal policy must also begin to transition towards greater sustainability. I say that again, Sir, with the return of our economy to more normal conditions, fiscal policy must also begin to transition towards greater sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, fiscal responsibility also requires efficient public expenditure. Every dollar spent, should deliver measurable value to the people. Government should continue strengthening public financial management, improving procurement systems, reducing wastage, and regularly reviewing programmes, to ensure that public funds are directed towards the highest priorities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, greater transparency and accountability in public expenditure will strengthen public confidence, while improving fiscal outcomes. However, Government does not become fiscally sustainable by simply spending less - they become fiscally sustainable when their economies become more productive, more competitive, and more capable of generating revenues to finance quality public services without continuing to increase its debts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the success of the current Budget does not lie in how effectively it controls expenditure, but on whether it lays the foundation for an elevated and sustained economic growth for Fiji over the coming decade. If we manage public finances with discipline, invest in productive sectors, strengthen accountability and diversify our economy, we can maintain both - economic growth and fiscal sustainability.

I wish to speak on the Budget theme, "*A Responsible Budget for Sustainable Future*", but I see this as a confused Budget by a confused Government. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the theme for our National Budget is an ambitious one that reflects Government's intention to balance economic growth, fiscal responsibility, sustainability, environment stewardship and social development.

A sustainable budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is not simply one that balances revenue and expenditure - it is one that lays the foundation for long-term growth by investing wisely, managing public finances responsibly, protecting the environment, and creating opportunities for our future generations.

Similarly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a sustainable future is one where economic growth is inclusive, public debt is manageable, natural resources are protected, businesses thrive and every citizen is given the opportunity to improve their quality of life.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the theme of our Budget challenges us to consider whether our policies and expenditure decisions are sustainable, not only for the coming financial year but also for the medium and the long term.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the theme of this Budget is commendable, it must ultimately be challenged against the realities of our nation's fiscal position. A budget cannot be regarded as sustainable simply because it bears that title. Sustainability is demonstrated through prudent fiscal management, responsible borrowing, and a credible pathway towards reducing debt over time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if our current fiscal trajectory continues unchecked, our national debt is likely to approach the $15 billion mark within the next two years. That should concern every member of this House. As debt continues to rise, an increasing portion of Government revenue will be diverted towards debt servicing, leaving less available for health, education, infrastructure, and national development. More importantly, Government will have very limited fiscal space to respond to unforeseen events such as natural disasters, global economic shocks, or future public emergencies.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if our debt continues to escalate, while economic growth remains subdued, our international lending partners may become increasingly reluctant to extend further financing. Such a situation would severely constrain Government's ability to refinance existing debt, fund essential developing priorities, and respond effectively to future economic challenges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must also pay close attention to our external position. Fiji's foreign reserves currently stand at approximately $3.45 billion, providing around five months of retained import cover. While this level requires close monitoring, continued large fiscal deficits, increasing external debt obligations and external economic shocks could place further pressure on these reserves.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, should our import cover decline towards the critical three-month threshold, confidence in our external position could weaken, pressure on the Fiji dollar would intensify, and our capacity to service external debt and finance essential imports could become significantly more challenging. To put it simply, Sir, we may be on the brink of our dollar being devalued if we go along that line. I know that the Ministry of Finance Officials are aware of this, and I also hope that we, the politicians, are also aware of this, and take seriously the issue that is at hand.

Mr. Speaker, this situation is not irreversible, but it requires decisive leadership. The first step is for Government to acknowledge that our current fiscal path is unsustainable, and that corrective action is required. The challenges before us are greater than politics and demand a national response. I, therefore, call upon Government to work with the Opposition in a genuine bipartisan manner, to develop a long-term fiscal recovery strategy that restores confidence in our public finances, strengthens economic growth, safeguards our foreign reserves, and places Fiji back on a sustainable path for future generations.

Some Budget Takeaways, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in assessing the Budget, I would like to acknowledge the areas where Government has demonstrated commitment to national development priorities and continued support for the wellbeing of the people. On education, very quickly, Sir, one of the key positives in this Budget is the continued strong investments in education. The allocation towards free education, student transport assistance, scholarships and school infrastructure, reflects a commitment to ensuring that all our children have access to learning opportunities.

We will agree, Mr. Speaker, that education provides the foundation of long-term growth and prosperity for any nation. However, that does not mean that all is well within our education sector and Members of the Opposition will highlight shortfalls and deficiencies in the implementation and policy matters that used to be the current practice in this august House.

The same thing with health - continued funding for the health sector is another important strength of this Budget. Investment in hospitals, health centres, medical supplies and healthcare workers is reflective of Government's recognition of the need to improve access to quality healthcare services. The task of improving our health facilities and healthcare systems is enormous, but they are essential for improving national productivity and our overall quality of life.

I wish to acknowledge our partners, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in assisting us as well in the improvement of health facilities because I know that not all the allocations are from the Government's PSIP or OPEX or CAPEX Programmes, but most of the assistance in the health sector also comes from our strategic partners, and I wish to acknowledge and thank them for their assistance this morning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on social protection, the continued support of social protection programmes including assistance for vulnerable households, senior citizens, persons with disabilities and low-income families is commendable. These measures are necessary to ensure that the most vulnerable within our communities continue to be protected.

On infrastructure development, I also wish to commend the continued focus on infrastructural development, although it may be slow, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as compared to the previous years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after many years of advocacy, I am grateful that Government has now given attention to improving our port facilities which, I have always been of the view, is necessary to support economic growth and, equally important, to reinforce our status as a trans-shipment and economic hub within our Small Island States of the Pacific.

On agriculture, the emphasis on supporting agricultural development is noteworthy, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Continued assistance for farmers through farm inputs, extension services and industry support is important for food security and improving rural livelihoods. This is particularly necessary for us where a large portion of the population depend on agriculture for their livelihood.

Now, I will go into some critical analysis, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Firstly, on public debt. The nominal value of public debt is projected to reach about $12.6 billion by May 2027. This is a cause for concern. That figure is inclusive of our budget deficits, but have not accounted for our contingent liabilities, which currently stand at $1.1 billion. Therefore, on the contingent liabilities, we must monitor very closely the performance of entities such as Fiji Airways, Fiji Development Bank (FDB), Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC), and I think in that $1.1 billion, we have not included Housing Authority. The former Minister for Finance loves bringing the contingent liability in all his addresses, so let us factor that $1.1 billion into the public debt that we have.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before the 2020 General Election, the Coalition Government repeatedly assured the people of Fiji that it will do two things – first is to restore fiscal discipline and, secondly, reduce Government debt.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Oh!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Nearly four years later, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that promise remains unfulfilled.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Instead of reducing our debt burden, Government now projects the total debt to reach $12.5 billion.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. I.B SERUIRATU.- I had warned about us approaching the $15 billion mark, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by the end of the 2026-2027 financial year. I am just reminding you of the promises that you have made, honourable Members.

Since assuming office, Government has increased public debt from $9.1 billion to a projected $12.5 billion - an increase of approximately $3.48 billion in just four financial years.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. I.B SERUIRATU.- Just four financial years, Mr. Speaker, Sir. What makes this even more significant is that Government has consistently criticised the previous administration for the level of debt accumulated over the 16 years or so in office. However, let me remind the honourable Members of the House on the other side that from 2006, it took approximately 15 years to accumulate that level of debt. You accumulated that level of debt just within four years.

By comparison, Government is projected to accumulate almost the same amount of additional debt in only four years. Mr. Speaker, Sir, these figures demonstrate that the pace of debt under the current Government is substantially faster than that of the previous administration.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- The question, therefore, is not what was said before the Election, but why the promise to reduce Government debt has not translated into measurable results.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with our current debt level, the annual debt interest servicing alone is approximately $600 million, as alluded by the honourable Minister. While the principal debt refinancing will be between $400 million to $600 million, the figure translates 45 cents of every Government dollar going towards debt servicing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this heavy debt burden leaves only 55 cents of every dollar available to fund essential services, such as health, education, and law and order. Government must now work to develop a roadmap to bring down our debt levels. This is critical to the future of this nation.

On Civil Service and Cabinet, Mr. Speaker, Sir, current indications are that Government places no serious concern on our extremely high debt levels and the impact it will have on our future generations.

HON. J. USAMATE. – Very poor!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Let us not be deceived, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our debt will have to be repaid - if not by our children, then it will be our children's children. An example is the size of Cabinet. The current Government will go down in history as the Government that appointed all its Members to be either Ministers or Assistant Ministers - oblivious to the strain the cost places on our already fragile economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our total Civil Service comprises about 42,000 workers and serves a national population of roughly 937,000 people. This means that we have approximately 45 civil servants for every 1,000 population. Comparatively, New Zealand's core public workforce stands at 64,163 against a population of approximately 5.36 million, meaning that there are about 12 public servants to every 1,000 New Zealanders, and they have committed to reducing their Civil Service size by 8,700, or no more than 1 percent in their total population by 2029.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what is stopping us from embarking on the same path? With our current annual Civil Service wages bill of $1.5 billion or $6 million a day, and total operating cost of $800 million or $3 million a day, Government must seriously consider following in the path taken by New Zealand.

I have no issues at all, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with our civil servants, but it is the number that concerns me, as maintaining that large number of civil servants and its associated costs will continue to add to the high public debt that we already have. These are the issues that we need to confront, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Politics aside, let us confront the issues. The nation has to survive.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the OPEX versus CAPEX mix in our current Budget is 82:18, against the preferred mix of 70:30, or better still, is 2:1; meaning that the current year's budget of $4.87 billion has allocated $3.99 billion to Operating Expenditure and $876 million only to Capital Expenditure. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this has been a trend in the last three years of this Government and is highly unsuitable. These figures must be reduced, and reduced significantly, if we are to bring down our debt burdens or, at least, maintain it at a manageable level. This is extremely important to ensure that we are not compromising the futures of our children by our inefficiencies.

On Government Spending Efficiencies, Mr. Speaker, Sir, how efficiently Government spends is a key measure of any National Budget. In the current environment of rising fiscal pressures, growing public debt and increasing demand for public services, the question of spending efficiency becomes vital to sound economic management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, spending inefficiency refers to the ability of the public sector to achieve maximum value from every dollar of expenditure. It means that resources are not only allocated to priority areas, but that they produce measurable, timely and meaningful outcomes for the people and their communities. This is exactly the reason I had always advocated stricter scrutiny of the outcomes derived from the budgets - that this must be tied to the KPIs of those tasked with managing our budgetary allocations.

On Public Sector Growth, Mr. Speaker, Sir, among the key drivers of sustainable economic growth is a strong, dynamic and confident private sector. While Government provides the regulatory frameworks, it is the private sector that creates employment, drives innovation and generates the productive investment needed for long-term growth. It is, therefore, imperative on Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure that the private sector is accorded with the necessary regulatory and economic environment in which businesses can grow, invest, and expand with confidence.

Central to that is policy certainty, Mr. Speaker, Sir. To achieve sustainable and inclusive growth, Government must continue to strengthen the conditions that allow businesses to thrive, while ensuring that the benefits of growth are widely shared across all communities, and I wish to pay particular attention on MSMEs. They provide employment for a good number of our people and, of course, if I remember correctly, their contribution to the economy is around 18 percent or so, and we need to help MSMEs.

On the Cost of Living, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the most important issues facing the people of Fiji today is the cost of living. While economic indicators may point to growth and recovery, the true measure of economic success for ordinary citizens is whether they can afford the basic necessities of life. For many citizens, especially at the grassroots level, the rising cost of food, housing, transport and utilities, remain a daily challenge.

I acknowledge, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the cost of living is influenced by several factors, a lot of which are beyond our control. The recent global events, such as geopolitical tensions, supply chain disruption and the fuel crisis, have a direct impact on domestic prices, resulting in increases in grocery bills, transport costs, and the cost of utilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for low-income families, these increases are particularly difficult because essential goods and services account for a large share of their budget. While the budget delivers programmes intended to support households, they do not, by themselves, address the underlying drivers of the cost of living, and I must say that the most sustainable response to the rising living costs is a stronger and a more productive economy.

Ultimately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, addressing the cost of living requires more than short-term measures. It requires structural reforms that strengthen the economy's productive capacity, increase domestic production, improve infrastructure, encourage investment, and create better-paying jobs. That, Mr. Speaker, is the challenge that we have.

On youth development, Mr. Speaker, Sir, ours is a very youthful population. According to the Fiji Bureau of Statistics figures, 62 percent of our population are under the age of 35. Our youth, defined by Government as individuals between the ages of 15 to 35, make up around 33.9 percent of our population, of which 18.3 percent are recorded as unemployed, notably higher than the national unemployment rate of 5.7 percent. These are alarming figures, Sir, call for immediate intervention by Government. While much attention is given to the elderly and the younger generation in our national budget, an equal level of attention must be accorded to our youth.

Mr. Speaker, our young people are talented, innovative, resilient, and increasingly connected to the global economy through education and technology. With the right policies and support, they can become skilled professionals and entrepreneurs who drive economic growth and social progress within our communities.

On Drugs and Crime, Mr. Speaker, Sir, no discussion on our future as a nation and as a people can ignore the growing challenge of drug issues and crime in Fiji. The National Budget, therefore, must seek to address the social issues that result from drug abuse and crime, and which directly have implications on our economic growth, community safety and national wellbeing.

The economic cost of drugs and crime, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is substantial. The increasing prevalence of illicit drugs, together with rising drug-related crimes, is a matter of national concern. They do not only destroy lives, but they are also placing increasing pressures on healthcare services, law enforcement and social services which are supported through the National Budget.

If we are to achieve the vision set out in this Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must address the challenges of drugs and crime with determination and compassion. By combining strong civic education, law enforcement and rehabilitation, we can protect our people, strengthen our communities and secure a sustainable future for our children.

On Labour Migration, this has become one of the defining features of our national economy. We are aware of the recent trends where an increasing number of Fijians have taken up employment opportunities, primarily in Australia and New Zealand, through seasonal work programmes, bilateral labour agreements and direct recruitment in sectors such as agriculture, the meat industry, health, education, construction and hospitality.

Remittances received as a result are projected to reach $1.5 billion by next year. These remittances contribute valuable foreign exchange to the national economy, help strengthen household consumption for ordinary Fijians, and provide an important buffer for our economy during periods of uncertainty.

I, therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, wish to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of our Fijian diaspora living and working abroad. Through their hard work and sacrifice, they continue to support thousands of families across Fiji by sending home remittances and have become an important pillar of our national economy. Their contribution extends far beyond financial support. They remain ambassadors for our nation and continue to maintain strong ties with their families and communities back home.

Given the significant and growing contribution of our diaspora to Fiji's economic and social development, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge the Government to seriously consider developing a comprehensive National Diaspora Policy. Such a policy should strengthen engagement with our overseas Fijians, encourage investment, facilitate skills and knowledge transfer, promote opportunities for those wishing to return home, and recognise the important role they play in our nation's development.

Conversely, Mr. Speaker, Sir, labour migration also presents significant challenges. Many sectors of the economy are experiencing shortages of skilled and experienced workers. Businesses report increasing difficulty recruiting qualified staff, as with our shipping industry, while public institutions face growing pressure to maintain service delivery with fewer experienced personnel. The shortage of radiologists and technicians at the Korovou and Levuka Hospitals are clear examples, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is not that young people seek opportunities abroad, but labour mobility and migration is a genuine choice, and many workers leave to improve their livelihoods and support their families. The challenge, therefore, is how do we ensure that Fiji remains an attractive place to live and work. That does not only require competitive remuneration, but also broader improvements in housing affordability, healthcare, education, and the overall quality of life. That, Sir, must be the focus of our Government moving forward.

On Climate Resilience, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is no longer simply an environmental issue – it is an economic, social and national development priority. The impact of climate change is evident all around us - coastal erosion, rising sea levels, continuous flooding and changing weather patterns. These events not only affect our environment, but also our economy, infrastructure, agriculture, tourism industry and the general livelihood of our people. Every major climate-related disaster place significant pressures on public finances, disrupts businesses and slows down economic growth.

Government should invest wisely in climate resilience programmes. Investments in these programmes enable us to respond more effectively when disasters do occur. Strong preparedness saves lives, protects public properties, and reduces recovery costs. Investing in climate resilience is essential because building resilience today is significantly less costly than rebuilding after disasters occur.

There are a few sectoral observations, so allow me to share some thoughts or perhaps, perceived gaps on a number of sectoral issues which, I believe, will have impacts on our people, especially at the grassroots level.

Let me go back to education. The allowance now granted to schools to collect funds from children, in addition to those grants already provided by Government, will cause unnecessary burden on our children and their families. This can be reconsidered or abolished as it places an unsustainable financial strain on low-income families.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government must consider reintroducing the Tertiary Education Loans Scheme (TELS) to provide a financial lifeline for aspiring students who do not qualify for top-tier scholarships and cannot afford to pay university fees privately. This is the way forward if we were to provide a level playing field for our students to pursue any area of study they wish to.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to improve the efficacy of our education system and make it holistic, Government must consider formally integrating civic education into the early stages of our school curriculum to foster responsible citizenship from a young age. This will help curb the issue of drugs and crime which a lot of our young children and youth are embroiled in.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the country is currently in a skills crisis. Private sector companies are challenged on organisational productivity and as such, growth, expansion, and diversification are affected, ultimately, stifling fiscal space.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us call a spade a spade and an apple an apple, and I welcome Government reverting almost 60 percent of the 1 percent training levy to be claimed by employers, if they invest in employee upskilling and reskilling. It is a sagacious decision. I welcome the 200 percent tax exemption on employees training related expenditure. This will allow employers to make training and development as a strategic priority.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge that Government makes 60 percent grant of the 1 percent levy claimable to entice employers to begin with employee training effective from 1st August, 2026. We cannot procrastinate skills development because we are in a skills crisis until 1st January, 2027.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there have been calls to make 1 percent levy administration and regulatory functions independent of a training provider. This also includes the regulatory function of National Apprenticeship Scheme, which is a stapled function to the 1 percent levy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I implore the Government that they make progressive decisions on skills development, do not delay on legislative amendments on the regulatory functions as otherwise impact will be minimal of the decisions taken.

On health, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the number of private and specialist medical facilities is notable as they cushion the strain on the public healthcare system and provide advanced specialised medical treatment that previously required overseas travel.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is good for our tourism industry as well, but are they accessible to the most vulnerable and low-income earners within our communities? If not, then this is another form of elitism where only the elite are able to access their services due to the astronomical costs involved.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am, therefore, proposing that Government consider a National Medical Insurance Scheme to ensure that all members of our community, regardless of their standard of living, are able to access the advanced services provided by these medical facilities.

On infrastructure, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the commitment that Government has made to develop our national infrastructure is commendable. Whilst there is much talk on roads, I request the Government to find solutions to the chronic road congestion within the Suva-Nausori and Suva-Lami corridors during peak hours. This is a "lived reality" for our people, Sir, the time it takes to get to Suva from Nausori, to be able to get to work or to school on time, is getting longer by the day.

I am aware, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that commuters living in the Nakasi area have to leave home as early as 5.30 a.m. to beat the morning rush and the associated road congestion, to be able to arrive at work and school by 8.00 a.m. This is a 30-minute drive on any normal day. This problem will not just go away, and the Government must find a solution to it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while on transportation, the stand-off between Government and the shipping industry has been a major concern for those within our maritime communities. For our maritime communities, shipping is their only lifeline. Government must find a solution to this as well. If enhancing Government shipping services or re-establishing the Government Shipyard will curb this problem, so be it.

On Social Welfare, Women and Children, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in relation to the social welfare sector, I call on Government to revert the policy regarding bus card credits for our senior citizens. Previously, they could accumulate and roll over credits to the next month to be able to visit families and loved ones. The current policy where credits expire at the end of the month was ill considered and highly disadvantage to our senior citizens.

Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, should also consider introducing a "Child Bus Card", to address the burden on parents where children as young as 4 years old are being charged full adult fares. Children must always be children and be accorded the care and service that they are entitled to.

While still on bus card, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have received calls from rural schools and communities for the yellow bus card to be made available to rural children to facilitate their travel to urban centres when required. Currently, yellow bus cards are only accessible to students in urban schools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the Death Benefit for our citizens, this has been revised downwards to $1,000 by this Government from the initial amount of $2,000. Considering the escalating cost of living, I urge Government to consider reinstating the initial level of death benefit and this is the least we owe to our elders.

Last on this sector, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government should consider supporting facilities such as the "Seek and Save Ministry," run by Mr. Elia Berabi, who is currently providing shelter for the "lost" young children and youth, and training them with the necessary life skills to grow and to become productive citizens in future.

In an obvious matter, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the services of the Ministry of Social Welfare, Women and Children is provided at two offices located at Suva Street and at Naibati House, along Gordon Street in Suva. Would you imagine an elderly woman seeking a service at one of the most challenging places to access in Suva, that is, Suva Street, only to be told that that particular service is only available at Naibati House. The logical decision that Government should make here is to bring the two offices together to a location in downtown Suva - a location that is easily accessible to all citizens, especially to our older folks.

On Rural and Maritime Development, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I understand that the Integrated Rural Development Framework (IRDF) is under review. This was developed to ensure better coordination in the planning and implementation of rural development. I hope that this process will be hastened, in order to allow for the consolidation of development funds to ensure a fair distribution of development across all communities.

On the same token, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the process for accessing the *iTaukei* funding is quite cumbersome and must be reformed. I hope that this review will take this into consideration, especially going through the Provincial Councils again before it comes to the Ministry of Rural Development. I strongly suggest that both *iTaukei* and other ethnic groups should have direct access to funding through the Ministry of Rural Development to eliminate bureaucratic delays, reducing the time and financial strain on citizens.

On National Defence and Security, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have witnessed lately the impact of the Police and the Military working in collaboration to combat the illicit drug trade in Fiji. I had raised the question on this earlier in Parliament and, again, I make the call for the Republic of Fiji Military Forces to remain and be given a bigger role in their fight against drugs and in maintaining of our national security and the development of our national infrastructure.

On iTaukei Affairs, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I plead again with the Ministry to expedite the implementation of most of the projects that are pending, given that the *iTaukei* population remains disproportionately disadvantaged in some areas. On that, I also ask that the improved participation of the *iTaukei* in Fiji's economic life is, therefore, accordingly important. They must have a serious stake in our economy as resource owners and the Government’s assistance in creating the enabling environment and incentives to improve it is very important.

A few recommendations before I conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Having considered the 2026-2027 National Budget, I respectfully offer the following recommendations to strengthen our economic resilience, improve fiscal sustainability and ensure that the benefits of growth translate to improved livelihoods for our people.

Recommendation 1 - Economic Diversification
Mr. Speaker, Sir, our experiences in the past has taught us that we cannot rely too heavily on any single sector for economic growth. Long-term resilience requires a broader and more diversified economic base. This is something we must strive towards. Economic diversification is not about replacing what already exists, it is about complementing them by developing new industries that create jobs, increase exports and strengthen our economy against future shocks.

Recommendation 2 - Modernisation of the Agriculture Sector
Mr. Speaker, Sir, agriculture has long been a cornerstone of our economy, but its potential has not been fully realised. Government should invest in mechanisation, agricultural research, climate-smart farming and modern supply chains. Greater support should also be provided for agro-processing so that we are able to export more finished products rather than raw commodities. I know that this is work in progress, and I hope that we will have more attention and also the allocation of resources to the agriculture sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no discussion on modernising agriculture would be complete without acknowledging the sugar industry which has, for generations, been the backbone of our rural economy and the livelihood of thousands of farming families.

However, we must also confront the reality that the industry has experienced. A prolonged decline over the last decade, despite substantial Government intervention and continued financial support. As recently highlighted by the Permanent Secretary for Finance, successive taxpayer-funded assistance, debt-guarantees, debt write-offs and annual subsidies have placed a significant burden on the nation's finances, while production continues to decline.

We cannot continue to ignore these realities, Mr. Speaker, Sir. There comes a time when we must take the bull by its horns and have an honest national conversation about the long-term future of this industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is precisely why this Parliament has established the Parliamentary Special Committee on Sugar, and it is both, timely and necessary. The Committee provides Parliament with an opportunity to engage directly with cane farmers, industry stakeholders and experts to objectively assess the industry's future and recommend a practical pathway forward.

Last week's consultation in the West was quite an experience, Mr. Speaker, Sir. If the evidence demonstrates that a gradual transition towards alternative high-value agricultural industries is in the best interest of our farmers and the nation, then Parliament must have the courage to consider those recommendations. Whatever course is ultimately adopted, it must protect the welfare of our canefarmers, preserve rural livelihoods, ensure responsible stewardship of public finances, and create sustainable economic opportunities for future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, reducing food imports while increasing agricultural exports will strengthen food security, improve rural incomes, and reduce pressure on our balance of payments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think the most pressing issue, apart from the forecasted guaranteed price, I think it is the election of the Growers Council, and I hope that the Government will also take this very seriously.

Recommendation 3 – Develop the Blue Economy

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our vast ocean resources provide significant opportunities for sustainable economic growth. Government should expand investment in sustainable fisheries, aquaculture, seafood processing, and marine biotechnology. Developing commercial opportunities in the fisheries sector will create employment and increase our export earnings. The blue economy should be a central pillar of our long-term development strategy.

Recommendation 4 - Building a Digital Economy

Mr. Speaker, Sir, digital economy offers opportunities that are not limited to our local geography. Investment in high-speed internet, digital literacy and innovation hubs supports industries such as software development, digital marketing, business process outsourcing and financial technology. Government should also continue expanding e-government services to improve efficiency and encourage digital transformation across our economy.

Recommendation 5 – Expansion of Manufacturing

Mr. Speaker, Sir, manufacturing, in my view, remains underdeveloped but has the potential to support economic growth and generate higher-value employment for our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government should develop policies that encourage investment in food and beverage processing, timber products, garments, and construction materials, among others. Improving productivity, reducing production costs and supporting export-orientated industries will strengthen our competitiveness in the international markets.

Recommendation 6 – Expansion of Export Markets

I have talked about timber products and I know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we have a good opportunity before us now in the recent passing of the Mahogany Bill - huge job opportunities for us. However, there are some priorities that need to be addressed and one of the first priorities, Sir, is the certification process.

I was in London a few weeks ago on the London Climate Action Week, and I had a lengthy discussion with our High Commissioner, Mr. Suveinakama. As we speak, Mr. Speaker, there is a container already in one of the yards in the UK where it cannot be offloaded and cannot be sold, simply because the mahogany is arriving without the certification. The certification needs to take priority and I urge all the authorities – the Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Trade, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Forestry to consider this because certification has two main components - the environmental side of things and the other one is the chain of custody because there are a lot of illegal sales of mahogany around the world. We are only accessing the American market now mainly because of an agreement but for us to get into the niche markets, particularly in Australia and New Zealand, we need the certification process. That must be our priority as we have a huge opportunity in terms of manufacturing now because of the recent Mahogany Bill that has been passed.

I know that Fiji Hardwood Corporation Ltd (FHCL) has plans already because their last debt was financed in 2023, an amount of $8.7 million. That was the last debt owed, paid and settled by FHCL. We are out of the red now, and the Government needs to seriously look at expanding timber products through mahogany.

Recommendation 7 – Strengthening Human Capital

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to speak on human capital. Sustaining our industries and diversification requires a skilled workforce. I hope that the Government will continue investing in education, particularly on TVET, digital skills, science, engineering and entrepreneurship. Strong partnerships between educational institutions and the industry will ensure graduates possess the skills required for emerging sectors.

Recommendation 8 –Renewable Energy

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on renewable energy, we need to make a transition towards renewable energy. Recent geopolitical tensions and disruptions to global oil markets have, once again, exposed Fiji's heavy reliance on imported fossil fuels.

Every increase in global oil prices is ultimately borne by our people, through higher transport costs, rising electricity costs, increased business operating expenses and the higher cost of essential goods and services. These are external shocks over which Fiji has little control, yet they have direct impact on our economy and the cost of living faced by every Fijian.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these events should serve as a wake-up call for Government to accelerate Fiji's transition towards renewable energy. While progress has been made, the pace of implementation remains far too slow. We must ask ourselves; why is the energy transition taking so long when the economic and environmental benefits are so clear?

Government must identify and remove unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles that delay renewable energy projects, encourage greater private sector investment, and work closely with Energy Fiji Limited (EFL) to ensure that its renewable energy transition plans are implemented with urgency. The transition to clean and affordable energy cannot remain a distant aspiration; it must become an immediate national priority.

By reducing our dependence on imported fuel, we will strengthen our energy security, improve our balance of payments, protect our foreign reserves, reduce electricity costs over the long term, and build a more resilient and sustainable economy for future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have seen what was in French Polynesia, the two separate projects - Agro-photovoltaic, producing 20 megawatts. Each of those farms produces 10 megawatts of renewable energy. There are perfect places in Fiji, like Yaqara, where cattle can graze below, whilst we have the panels on top. These are innovations that are already being available in the Pacific, and I hope that we can bring this closely to Fiji.

<u>Recommendation 9 – Encourage Innovation and Research</u>
Mr. Speaker, Sir, in regard to innovation and research, the long-term economic growth requires continuous innovation. Government, universities, research institutions and the private sector should collaborate to develop new products, improve productivity and commercialise research. Innovations will be critical to enhancing our competitiveness.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget devotes much attention to expenditure sustainability - presenting a detailed strategy for controlling expenditure, improving efficiency and slowing the growth of recurrent expenditure, comparatively less attention is given to developing policies and a medium to long-term strategy to strengthen revenue generation, stronger investment, expanding exports and sustained economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a nation, we have faced many challenges over the years. We have endured devastating cyclones, political upheavals, economic recession, and the unprecedented impact of COVID-19. Each of these events tested our resilience, our institutions, and the resolve of our people. Despite these hardships, we have always demonstrated an extraordinary ability to recover, rebuild, and move forward. That resilience gives us confidence in our future. The challenge at hand is to build a stronger, more resilient, and more inclusive nation - a nation where economic growth creates opportunities for everyone, where every child receives quality education, where every family has access to affordable healthcare and decent housing, where businesses can invest with confidence, and where our young people can see a future for themselves and their families.

Our responsibility, therefore, in this august House, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is not merely to debate numbers - it is to save the future of our nation. Unfortunately, the current Budget gives us very little space to move forward towards a future that we would wish for ourselves and our children. It is for this reason, therefore, that I cannot support this Budget.

MR. SPEAKER.- As honourable Members may have been alerted to this morning by the Secretariat, we will have foregone our morning tea break to continue with our budget debate. With this note, I can assure the honourable Members, your Parliament's efforts towards your contribution to Government’s cost-cutting. On the contrary, the good health and wellbeing of honourable Members remain a priority for the Secretariat. It is only because time is of the essence this week.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, and we also acknowledge the presence of the Lady Member of Parliament from the Parliament of Tasmania. I do not know whether you were there when a good friend of mine, Colonel Andrew Matthy, came down to be Commander of Tasmania. We were together at the Joint Service Staff College in Canberra in 1982. We thank Australia for its cooperation, knowledge, education and military education.

We served together in the Sinai Desert where he was Chief Liaison Officer. He was the first Military Liaison Officer in the Observer Group that was deployed in support of the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO). It is a small world, made even smaller by international cooperations that we have benefited from through policies and arrangements by our predecessors in government, and what we do now will also be felt by our people and future governments of this country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Members of Parliament and fellow citizens, I rise to contribute to the Budget debate for the 2026-2027 National Budget. I do so with humility, confidence in our people and a clear sense of responsibility that is upon us as members of these honourable houses.

I commend the honourable Minister for Finance, Commerce and Business Development, and all those involved, in the preparation of the Budget that is responsible, realistic and focused on Fiji’s future.

I also acknowledge the honourable Leader of the Opposition's contribution as Opposition's spokesperson for finance. I thank him for his observations, but I was not prepared for this conclusion that you are not going to support the Budget.

This Budget carries the theme, “*A Responsible Budget for Sustainable Future*”. It means, public money must be used with purpose, borrowing must be managed with care, and today's investments must strengthen the Fiji that our children will inherit.

I would like to also acknowledge the figures that were mentioned by the honourable Leader of the Opposition, but I was telling the honourable Acting Attorney-General that all the figures say that, but what about what has happened on the ground - the effects of the growth in the debt figures? He did not mention the relationship with GDP, but then we can see on the ground that there have been developments, Mr. Speaker Sir.

In the days ahead of us, we will be debating and we will be scrutinising this Budget, as our duty demands. I only ask that we debate with seriousness, fairness and respect for facts, for the sake of our people. This Budget is about those people, the people of a small, great nation - facing rising costs, workers seeking secured jobs, young people acquiring skills, farmers needing better roads, the public servants, tourism workers, market vendors, and small businesses who keep Fiji moving everyday.

I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for mentioning the contribution of small and medium enterprises to the economy and the unemployment figures of this country. This budget Mr. Speaker, Sir is about building a stronger Fiji together - fiscally responsible, socially just, economically resilient, and united in purpose.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's Vision 2050 is very clear - Fiji to become a high-income resilient economy, delivering 5 percent to 6 percent growth by 2050. That is not very far ahead, only 24 years away, but a lot of work needs to be done.

Fiji does not budget in isolation. We are a small island economy, interconnected with the rest of the world in every facet of our economy. Whatever happens around the world affects us directly and very quickly. As we experience now in the energy and shipping markets, that is what is happening. Higher oil prices impact everything in the market.

In recent years, we have faced shocks that no Government created but every Government had to confront. Our predecessors, most of them are sitting in the Opposition today had to face the reality of the effects of COVID-19, which caused one of the deepest contractions in our history, with the economy falling by 17.2 percent in 2020 and 4.3 percent in 2021.

Then Fiji recovered, but recovery alone is neither sufficient nor automatic. We must address structural challenges that continue to constrain our progress, including infrastructure, productivity gaps, cost of living pressures, workforce challenges and emerging threats to national security and social cohesion.

We have a difficult reality, but the responsible response is to protect our people where we can, while keeping Fiji on a path of discipline, growth and resilience. The pathway to prosperity must be productivity-driven and private sector-enabled. Government's role is to establish enabling conditions through sound policies, quality infrastructure, effective institutions and a stable investment environment, while businesses, investors, workers and communities drive innovation, employment and economic opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, responsible budgeting begins with transparency, accountability and discipline. The Budget figures presented two weeks ago by the honourable Minister for Finance are serious numbers. We place them openly before Parliament because public trust begins with openness and honesty.

Faced with our current reality, Government has chosen targeted, time-bound relief, while maintaining discipline across the rest of Government. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) assessed that Fiji faces no immediate risk of debt distress, provided growth is sustained and fiscal discipline is maintained. Discipline is central to this Budget, and we pay respects to the previous governments, including the most immediate past, for projecting Fiji as a responsible nation, a responsible debtor. We have honoured our debts according to the very programmes of those debts.

Responsibility is about maintaining fiscal discipline while actively encouraging growth. It is spending where it matters most, protecting those most exposed; not reducing ambition, but ensuring every dollar invested delivers maximum value for our people.

For that reason, Government is reviewing the Civil Service. I note what the honourable Leader of the Opposition mentioned, to contain the salaries bill, tightening controls on travel, workshops, fuel and maintenance, and requiring stronger value-for-money reviews, driving performance.

On revenue, we are widening the tax base, improving compliance, recovering arrears, and modernising tax administration for a digital economy.

The Budget focuses on strengthening expenditure management, improving public sector efficiency, enhancing revenue administration, widening the economic base, and ensuring that public resources are directed towards programmes that generate sustainable economic and social returns.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the cost of living and everyday expenses are not merely basic economic indicators - they are the daily experiences of families managing electricity bills, transport costs, food prices and essential requirements.

This Budget places targeted relief at the centre of Government's response. The fuel duty concession on diesel and heavy fuel oil is extended to 31st October, 2026, with a 20 cents per litre reduction on diesel and a 12 cents per litre reduction on heavy fuel oil. This supports electricity supply and helps contain wider fuel-driven costs.

Without running the risk of repeating what the honourable Minister for Finance has already presented, I say this - the Budget provides targeted support to assist households through measures such as fuel duty concessions, electricity subsidies, transport assistance, zero-rated VAT on essential items, free water concessions for eligible households and targeted duty reductions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government recognises that lasting relief cannot come from support measures alone. Sustainable improvements in living standards must come from a stronger economy that creates jobs, increases productivity and expands opportunities. Therefore, this Budget balances immediate assistance to long-term investments that strengthen economic growth and improve the wellbeing of all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, relief is necessary, but relief alone is not a development strategy. Fiji must grow, Fiji must invest and Fiji must produce and create jobs. Investment Fiji is facilitating 254 active projects worth $8.6 billion and honourable Koroilavesau who, unfortunately, is not in the House at the moment, but mentioned this in the Committee observations. That is across tourism, real estate, digital infrastructure, renewable energy, agriculture and manufacturing. Of those, 107 are under construction and expected to become operational within three years, with a further 95 percent in advanced pre-development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a Taskforce on Investment Approval Process comprising Ministries and agencies, and headed by the Office of Prime Minister, in facilitating projects to help them start. Significant investments are currently underway, with consultations and preliminary feasibility studies being carried out to determine their economic viability, structural design and long-term benefits. These projects include major port developments and maritime infrastructure, aimed at supporting Fiji’s regional maritime hub status.

These mega investment projects will significantly improve trade efficiency, enhance logistics capability, and support the growth of the Blue Economy. This pipeline matters because jobs are created by confidence. When investors build, jobs are created across construction, tourism, agriculture, transport, services and supply chains. It is envisioned that these projects will create thousands of employment opportunities, attract billions in foreign direct investment and greatly boost our investment-to-GDP ratio. These are necessary investments to inject liquidity into critical sectors across our economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I may, honourable Koroilavesau, while you were absent, I mentioned the billions in the pipeline. Shipbuilding and marine engineering development initiatives are critical investment projects in the pipeline for our great nation. These initiatives are directly focused on creating new industrial capabilities that will subsequently strengthen Fiji’s domestic maritime sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another critical investment is the National Tertiary Hospital development, which represents a transformational investment in Fiji’s healthcare system, specialist medical capability and human capital development.

At the heart of economic growth, tourism-related infrastructure investments, including tourism developments, airport improvements such as the proposed new international airport in Vanua Levu and supporting facilities - are being prioritised to strengthen Fiji's competitiveness as a leading global tourism destination. Now, is the input of the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and his team in the contribution of tourism and civil aviation to the economy of the country.

A stronger Fiji requires a stronger and more resilient rural economy. Agriculture remains central to food security, and we acknowledge the remarks made by the honourable Leader of the Opposition. It remains central to exports, employment and climate resilience. This Budget reinforces Government's commitment to supporting farmers, strengthening waterways, revitalising the sugar sector and improving rural economic opportunities. I thank the honourable Members of the Special Committee on Sugar for the tour of the West last week, and we asked the Minister for Youth and Sports to ensure that we get boxing certificates when we next tour.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Special Committee on Sugar Industry toured the West and the tour provided critical insights into the challenges that our sugarcane farmers are facing – challenges that this Budget directly addresses through enhanced farm mechanisation, targeted fertiliser subsidies, and the upgrading of critical cane access roads. Also, Fiji must produce more, process more, export more and innovate more. That is why the Budget supports manufacturing, commercial agriculture, digital services and new financing platforms for small and medium enterprises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, skills are equally important. Fiji faces pressure from the migration of our skilled workers. Remittances are a lifeline for families and are projected to reach $1.48 billion this year. And I reiterate the words of the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, who acknowledges the contribution of our diaspora to our economy here in Fiji. We honour those Fijians abroad, but every departure also leaves a gap at home.

Government's response is to train more people, retain more talent and mobilise the diaspora. The Budget supports training institutes and extends the Employment Taxation Scheme, including incentives for apprenticeships, work placements and employment of persons with disabilities.

The temporary reduction of the FNPF employer contribution rate from 10 percent to 8 percent for twelve months is interim relief to protect jobs during a period of higher costs. Employers who continue contributing up to 10 percent will receive a 150 percent tax deduction. At the same time, FNPF will declare a 9.5 percent annual interest rate for members for the year ending 30 June 2026, one of the strongest returns in the Fund's history. On FNPF we are still working on relief for those who are disadvantaged by the FNPF decrease and some of the very senior members of society then, who had contributed so much to the fund, are still trying to get their certification, and I promise them, that this Parliament will address those issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, development is built through roads, bridges, water systems, schools, hospitals, ports, energy network, and digital infrastructure. This budget provides $825 million for the Ministry of Public Works, $368.8 million for the Fiji Road Authority, and $290.6 million for the Water Authority of Fiji. These allocations connect farmers to markets, communities to services, and businesses to opportunities.

The Budget allocates $708 million to the Ministry of Education and maintain Free Education Grants - from early childhood to secondary school. Education – must provide hope, but also the skills Fiji needs, technical, digital, agriculture, health, teaching, entrepreneurship and practical training. We must pay respect to the older generation of parents who paid for our education (honourable Members who are sitting here) with very limited, little or no support from government, apart from those of us who came through schools under the provincial scholarships.

The budget provides $476.9 million to the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, supporting doctors, nurses, alliedworkers, medical supplies, hospitals and health centres. It also provides $8 million worth of new national tertiary hospitals, at Valelevu, in partnership with Australia.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a stronger Fiji must include a stronger rural economy. Agriculture is strategic, it affects food security, exports, rural incomes, climate resilience, and the dignity of communities that they have had in this nation for generations. I thank the honourable Minister for *iTaukei* Affairs and the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management for their efforts, recently highlighted in the press and in various public announcements. I thank you for the work that you do, and your staff, and those that are deployed in rural areas.

The budget provides $221 million for Agriculture and Waterways, and maintains $96.3 million in support for the sugar industry, including weedicide and fertilise subsidies, a sugar stabilisation fund, cane access roads, and direct support to farmers. These were also highlighted by the Special Committee on the Sugar Industry during our tour of the West last week. Fiji must give more of what is consumed.

We need stronger links from farm to market, better storage, better processing, better finance, and closer links between agriculture, tourism, retail, and exports. Rural development must also integrate; agriculture, infrastructure, water management, and disaster resilience. We must also encourage our local producers to produce the quality that are required by international visitors who come and populate our hotels right through the years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, national development must ensure that every community is participating meaningfully in growth, and for Fiji that includes mainstreaming, *iTaukei* participation in socio-economic development. As custodians of the largest land of cultural assets, *iTaukei* communities must be empowered to translate ownership into sustainable economic opportunities, employment, and prosperity for future generations. We have asked our Sub-Committee on Legislation to speed up legislation that will incorporate United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) especially ILO 169, into the various legislations to bring into effect the purposes of those declarations.

This budget must introduce a tax incentive for companies with at least 30 percent *iTaukei* shareholding, investing in ecotourism, culture, and arts businesses. It provides a seven-year tax holiday for investment between $5 million, $10 million and 13-year tax holidays for investments above that threshold. This is more than a tax measure. It is a statement of the direction; indigenous participation must be built into national development and not treated as an afterthought. When iTaukei communities are economically stronger, Fiji is stronger. When landowners become entrepreneurs the tax base grows, when cultural assets are developed respectfully, tourism becomes richer and confidence grows.

Mr. Speaker, the present fuel pressures remind us that Fiji must reduce its dependence on imported energy over time. I also acknowledge the contribution from the honourable Leader of the Opposition in this matter. This Budget extends accelerated depreciation incentives for fuel and gas storage and, for the first time, for electric vehicle charging stations. These are practical steps toward energy security and cleaner transport.

Climate resilience must remain central to national planning. Typhoons, large coastal erosions and saltwater intrusion affect our homes, farms, schools, roads, water systems, and health facilities.

Our blue economy must continue to protect reefs, our fisheries, coastal communities, and maritime resources while creating sustainable opportunities.

A modern economy also needs modern Government. The businessNOW platform will reduce delays for entrepreneurs and investors, while new incentives for peer-to-peer lending and equity crowdfunding will open financing channels for small businesses. Public safety is equally important. The budget supports duty reductions on surveillance cameras for the Suva-Nausori CCTV corridor and provides additional funding for specialised police drug operations. The drug threat, as also mentioned, requires enforcement and international co-operation. We need to enhance our rehabilitation and partnership with families, churches, schools, traditional leaders, and communities in the fight against drugs.

Faced with current challenges, the Budget provides the platform and discipline to grow the economy. We are doing this on a real time basis with mega projects. Further, Mr. Speaker, Sir, last week, Fiji and Australia signed the Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance. These are two transformative agreements that will usher Fiji into a new realm of immense impacts in the next century, as a start. This is about credibility, trust and responsibility. The economic pillar of the union focuses on building the economic structure; this is profound and lasting. The agreed 10-year Work Plan - in health, education, infrastructure, law enforcement, defence, environment, digitalisation, and governance - are encompassed in that. Ministries and sectors are now busy reaching project readiness stage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all talk about investment, tourism and economic growth, stability, human rights and a lot exist in a space. That space depends on one single component, that I call it our vital ground as a nation – that is, democracy. The Coalition Government has and will continue to protect and promote democracy and the freedom and dignity of every individual citizen of this country. This is integral to stability, to confidence, to attracting investors, to sustaining businesses, to providing opportunities for our people to building futures. On this platform of democracy - we build our shared future. The work of the Constitutional Review Commission and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission are integral to this.

Mr. Speaker, Fijians have faced hard times before and each time, our people have shown resilience, but we must also plan, reform, invest and act with discipline. This is what the Government is doing in this budget.

The 2026-2027 National Budget recognises that the road ahead will not be easy. It sees the world as it is, protects people where it is needed, where it is needed, and reforms where Government must do better. We always try and improve on what we receive. It is a budget for discipline, as we must learn to live within our means. It is also compassionate because families should not face global shocks alone. It is for growth as jobs and investments are the foundation of lasting prosperity.

It is for fairness, because a tax system must protect those less and more of those with greater capacities. To all our citizens, I say this, "your Government understands the pressure that you now face." We know that the cost of living is real. We know that for you, jobs matter. We know that health, education, water, roads and safety are daily needs. You face them daily. We know the future must be built, not only for a few but for all of us. I call that together we build a stronger Fiji. One that protects its people, honours its obligations, grows its economy, strengthens its community and leads those generations to carry the burden of decisions made without care.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support your Budget for 2026-2027 and invite your participation in this debate in confidence for the future of our beloved nation.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament, I rise today with the simple truth that has guided our people for generations. A nation moves forward when its leaders move forward together. Fiji has always been the strongest when we choose cooperation over conflict, humility over showmanship and shared purpose over political points scoring.

As we consider the 2026-2027 National Budget, I speak not to divide, but to unite, because our people deserve a Parliament that walks with one voice when the stakes are this high. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have always known the honourable Minister for Finance and his team. Preparing a national budget is never easy and it is especially challenging in a period of economic stress. The Minister has outlined the pressures we face which include slow growth, rising debt and the burden of the cost of living carried by Fijian families.

These are real issues, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and they deserve real solutions. My reflections today are offered in good faith, with the hope that Government and Opposition can work together to strengthen this Budget and plan a more secure path forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, every budget tells two important stories. The first story is about how a government intends to manage the nation's finances over the next 12 months, how much revenue it expects to collect, how much it intends to spend, how large the deficit will be, and how the deficit will be financed. However, there is a second story, that is far more important. It tells the people of Fiji what kind of nation we want to become. It tells us what we value most. It tells us who we choose to protect where resources become rare. It tells us whether we are preparing for the next financial year or whether we are building foundations for the next generation.

The numbers in this Budget speak clearly. They project a fiscal deficit of $1.045 billion and 7 percent of GDP is one of the largest in our history outside a natural disaster or global pandemic. Our operating revenue coverage ratio has fallen to 0.96, meaning the re-current expenditure now exceeds re-current revenue. These signals the Government operations day by day relying on borrowing. This is not sustainable and it is not a partisan matter. It is a national challenge that requires bipartisan resolves. Capital investment has also declined sharply. A decade ago, for every dollar spent on running the Government, 64 cents went towards capital projects, roads, ports, water systems, hospitals, schools and health infrastructure.

Today that figure, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is just $0.22 cents. This matters because capital investment is the foundation of future growth. When we invest less in productivity assets, we slow the expansion of our economic capacity. This is not about blame, it is about recognising that Fiji's long-term development requires a stronger commitment to building for tomorrow. This must come first and foremost by creating confidence at all levels of our economy – from the cane farmers to tuna fishers, to tourism workers and to a taxi driver, as the base level of that confidence. Confidence comes from commitment from the Government to a budget that improves the lives of our people.

At the next level, we have investors and innovators among our people. If a government cannot demonstrate to them that we can work together and that we can deliver on building a nation for all Fijians, then we have lost them. Then we have overseas investors who do their country's studies. When they find a divided government, a country caught up in instability, they move on in the cycle of not having a confident nation at the leadership level, at the level of government, and that includes the Opposition. That means our people are the ones who will suffer.

I wanted to make that the starting point of my contribution. Public debt now stands at around 85 percent of GDP. Debt servicing alone will cost nearly $600 million this year. We can say that money that could otherwise strengthen our health system, improve our schools, or support families struggling with rising prices. Borrowing to fund operations and borrowing to service past borrowing is a cycle we must break together. No government - past, present or future can solve this alone. It requires a shared national commitment to fiscal responsibility and economic transformation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we examine the expenditure allocation, we see that 82 percent of the budget is devoted to operating cost, with only 18 percent directed towards capital investment. Poverty remains widespread. The cost of living continues to rise. Families face higher prices for food, fuel, and medicine. These realities transcend political lines. They affect every community, every province and every household. Our infrastructure agencies, Water Authority of Fiji, Fiji Roads Authority, Land Transport Authority and others receive substantial allocations, yet service delivery challenges continue. Water disruptions continue, roads deteriorate faster than they are repaired and public transport remains unreliable for many.

We must work together to ensure that these agencies have the capacity, leadership, and long-term planning needed to deliver reliable services. At the same time, we must call out instance when public money is not spent wisely. I come from a family of builders, and the advice for us in construction is to measure twice and cut once to a sure job. One example or two examples that I want to cite today is the Semo Road repairs, show a bailey bridge being constructed, then removed. Who is counting this cost? Why was the construction done, then taken down, without services intended purposes, to put us back on the road? I hope the honourable line Minister will perhaps explain in his response.

The other one, Mr. Speaker, on my travel to Suva down the King's Highway, I have seen the road construction of a small maybe 100 meters stretch for the past two years. Someone joked that maybe someone had found gold. It is a major civil works exercise, not road re-construction. So much excavation work had been done, and the extractions were piled on the seesaw, and some on the hillside. The public in Ra and travellers are surprised that no road has been built, but digging continues. Again, it is an example of money badly spent, maybe planning, that comes into the picture, which is the root cause of the warning signals in this budget.

This is a similar situation to Westin. I had raised this in past sittings. Now, I am told that there is a new twist in that project, and that is in regard to the land lease. I have been told that iTLTB intends to re-enter. I hope the honourable Minister will clarify this situation as well. We need a shared vision that lifts productivity across the entire economy. Productivity is not a partisan concept. It is the engine of national progress. Higher productivity means higher wages, stronger exports, more important and greater revenue without levying the taxes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to highlight one or two specific areas where bipartisan co-operation can deliver real and measurable progress - areas where the budget itself shows both the urgency of the problem and the opportunity for shared solutions. One, the sugar industry, strengthening the existing Parliamentary Sugar Select Committee into a permanent bipartisan institution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget allocates substantial investment, yet the industry faces major challenges. Farmers are asking not for a fair payment, but also for Government to give them some degree of certainty and confidence. Productivity remains low, land tenure issues continue, but then there is a massive loss of confidence. Our farmers need stability and equity in the operation of the industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Parliamentary Sugar Select Committee, on which I have had the privilege to serve, has already demonstrated the value of cross-party co-operation. We have engaged farmers, FSC leadership and technical experts. We have listened to real stories from real families whose livelihood depend on sugar. It is also important that we do not continue to racialise sugar as a sector for Indo-Fijians. We are given a figure of around 20,000 farmers and workers across the industry, and this includes a substantial number of *iTaukei* at all levels. Sugar is a national industry with a national representation of our people.

One of the areas where we had a robust reception was in Rakiraki, not to mention Ba, but I can assure the honourable Prime Minister that I have got a sponsorship who has agreed to give five sets of boxing gloves. So, honourable Minister for Sports you do not have to worry about that. Traditionally, one of the most productive sugar sectors in Fiji, while we can talk endlessly about those who took down the mill and those who promised to rebuild the mill, this will not address the concerns of these farmers in Ra. Let us move on and look at solutions.

We need an independent study on the potential for the Ra sector, with a standalone commercial entity to run the sugar industry, like the CSR did before 1973 - without their abuse of power. A diversified sugar industry project that once again hooks up the happy valley line of Ra with the mill and the Ellington Wharf. A commercial operation with multiple revenue streams, including biomass electricity generation, sustainable machinery, bagasse repurposing are some of the examples that we can work on.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, building on this foundation, I propose that we transform this Parliamentary Sugar Select Committee into a permanent bipartisan institution, and this permanent Committee could oversee land tenure certainty framework, guide a national mechanisation framework which has been mentioned earlier on by previous speakers to address the labour shortages, develop a replanting programme with measurable annual targets, explore ethanol production, biomass energy, and ensure that subsidies deliver measurable improved in cane yield.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have given some examples of wastage of public funds in some areas that we need to control. This is not about pointing fingers, let me make it very clear. It is about ensuring that every dollar spent on infrastructure delivers real improvement for Fijian families.

Good governance and accountability, the foundation of service delivery. A budget is only as strong as the institution that implements it. Good governance is not an optional extra, it is the platform on which service delivery stands. Good governance is not a political slogan; it is the backbone of effective service delivery. These examples show that cooperation is not only possible, but also necessary.

Fiji's challenges are too complex for any one side of this House to solve alone. Our people expect us to bring our best ideas, not our loudest voices. They expect us to build bridges, not walls. The challenges outlined in this budget are serious, but they are not impossible. If we approach them with a nation-building ethos, Government and Opposition side-by-side, we can restore confidence, strengthen institutions and plan a path toward sustainable growth.

We can build a Fiji where every child has access to quality education, where every family has access to reliable healthcare, where every community feels secure and where every citizen believes in the promise of our nation.

Let us move forward together, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as highlighted by the honourable Prime Minister. Let us commit to responsible fiscal management, long-term economic transformation, stronger social services, and to institutions that uphold fairness and accountability. Let us place the interests of Fiji above the interests of politics. Our people deserve nothing less.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I offer these reflections in good faith, and in the hope that this House can work closely to strengthen the budget, refine our priorities, and build a better future for all Fijians. In keeping with my opening sentiments, and with all due respect to the Government of the day for their work, the Opposition, as mentioned by the honourable Leader of the Opposition, stands ready to contribute, if needed, to share ideas and support initiatives that advance the national interest. Let us choose partnership over division, and unity over discord. As our elders often remind us, "A house stands firm when every pillar carries its share." Let us be those pillars, let us carry our share and let us build the Fiji our people deserve.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, viewers tuning-in live on Parliament's *Facebook* channel, ni sa yadra vinaka. *Au va yadra ‘ale ika ga yani vei kemuni na wekaqu, na kai ciqu, ‘ako kai, lavo kai, lo vara kai ni varorogo ‘ika mai na nomuni vei dela ni yavu va'uraga kei na veiyasa i vuravura.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, firstly, I would like to thank the Almighty God for His protection, my people for their protection, guidance and direction, enabling us to gather here this afternoon. I rise to make my contribution on the fourth National Budget of the Coalition Government, a significant milestone that underscores the solidarity, relentlessness, and stability of our Government, led by the honourable Prime Minister, Sitiveni Rabuka.

I would like to applaud the honourable Minister for Finance and his team for a well-thought-out and well-articulated Budget that takes into account the benefits for all Fijians. Mr. Speaker, at a time when most countries around the world struggle to navigate around the current economic uncertainty, climate-related risks, and evolving global markets. Fiji, through this budget, is choosing a long-term sustainable economic pathway by focussing on investing in the sectors that will deliver long-term resilience. It recognises that sustainable development is not achieved through short-term measures, but through deliberate investments that strengthen communities, protect our natural resources, and expand opportunities for future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a *Responsible Budget for Sustainable Future*. It recognises that responsible government is not measured simply by today's expenditure, but by the investments we make to secure tomorrow's prosperity. This is not just a financial plan, it is a covenant with our people, a promise that the wealth of our seas and our forests will be managed wisely, shared fairly, and protected fiercely.

Mr. Speaker, the Fisheries Sector is more than an industry, it is the soul of our villages, the strength of our economy, and the hope of our children. When we speak of fisheries, we speak of food on the table, jobs for our youth, dignity for our families and resilience for our nation. This Budget is therefore not about numbers alone, it is about people, prosperity, and the sustainable future of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Fisheries has been allocated $28.4 million in the 2026-2027 Financial Year, an increase of $3.83 million as compared to the current budget of $24.6 million. This increase is not arbitrary; it reflects a strategic focus and provides confidence and direction for investing in our resource owners. Operating Expenditure has been reduced by $581,200 requiring credit controls on wages, allowances, travel, and maintenance.

Capital Expenditure has increased by $4.7 million, prioritising on infrastructure, research facilities and grants that will strengthen long-term resilience and productivity. With the budget provision for the fiscal year, the Ministry of Fisheries will continue to review and strengthen the laws governing Fiji's fisheries, mainly the in-shore fisheries and the offshore fisheries legislations. We must ensure that our policies are modern and fit for purpose, practical and responsive to the challenges of climate change, illegal fishing and global market pressures.

Mr. Speaker, let me begin with the offshore sector, a cornerstone of our export earnings and a key pillar of Fiji's global and regional fisheries engagement. The Ministry has secured a new Tuna Development Fund of $5 million. This investment will strengthen Fiji's competitiveness in the global tuna market, ensuring that our fleets remain viable, our exports remain strong and our nation continues to benefit from one of our most valuable marine resources.

Mr. Speaker, we are also devoting $515,000 in electronic monitoring systems. This will enhance transparency, reduce illegal fishing and provide reliable data for management. The effect is twofold, stronger compliance with international obligations and a greater credibility in global markets. Additionally, $80,000 has been allocated for offshore exploratory fishing development. This will allow for the exploration of new fishing grounds, diversification into new fisheries and the reduction of pressure on existing fish stocks, thereby supporting the management of in-shore fisheries. This investment in the offshore sector is about securing Fiji's place in the global fisheries economy, protecting our reputation and ensuring that our people benefit from the wealth of our ocean.

Mr. Speaker, while offshore fisheries drive exports, coastal fisheries sustain our communities. They are the daily bread of thousands of families, the heartbeat of our villages and the foundation of food security. Through the pathway to market project, the Ministry will establish and equip fishers co-operatives with the capacity to operate as a business and connect the fishers' co-operatives directly to the market, ensuring fair returns and reducing exploitation. The effect is more money and maximum benefit is received in the hands of fishing families and creating a stronger village economy.

The Diversifying Coastal Fisheries Livelihoods Programme, Mr. Speaker, will expand opportunities beyond traditional fishing. By supporting seaweed farming, crab fattening and artisanal processing, we are creating new income streams that reduce pressure on over-harvested species. The positive impact is resilient, households that can withstand shocks and ecosystems that can recover.

We are also introducing $50,000 to support fish warden operations as a frontline for community-based fisheries management. This will empower local fish wardens to enforce regulations, protect marine resources and strengthen community-based management. The effect is better compliance with fisheries regulations, which reduces coastal IUU fishing, better information to support 30 percent commitment and stronger community buy-in for fisheries management and conservation measures.

Mr. Speaker, to further strengthen livelihoods, the Ministry will continue with the construction phases for the Koro and Cawaro Fisheries Stations. Ground and preparatory works have also begun for the new Matakunea and Natovi Fisheries Stations, having allocations of $300,000 and $50,000 respectively. A total of $480,823 is also assigned for the purchase of the Vanuabalavu and Levuka ice machines and other salt flake ice machines.

These facilities, Mr. Speaker, will reduce post-harvest losses, improve product quality and extend the shelf life of fish. The effect is high incomes for fishers, better access to markets and stronger food security for communities. Capital investments will support this vision and expand extension and advisory services, bringing training and support closer to communities.

Mr. Speaker, these investments in coastal fisheries are about dignity, fairness and resilience. They ensure that no community is left behind, that every family has a chance to prosper and that our cultural heritage is preserved.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, aquaculture is our pathway to sustainable growth. In alignment with Fiji's Aquaculture Development Plan, we are creating hatcheries and investing in research to cultivate high value species such as prawns, tilapia and marine fishes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to highlight the significant increase in the Food Security Project. This Project has received expanded funding of $750,000 to ensure that aquaculture directly supports household nutrition and national resilience. With this increase, we will support smallholder aquaculture projects that provide affordable fish for local consumption, strengthen feed production and distribution systems to reduce costs and improve efficiency, and enhance training and extension services so that communities can manage aquaculture sustainably.

The Food Security Project is not isolated, it is directly linked to the Commercial Aquaculture Development Project, which has also received significant increases amounting to $750,000. Together, these two initiatives form a continuum. The Food Security Project ensures that families have access to affordable nutritious fish, strengthening household resilience.

The Commercial Aquaculture Development Project scales production for domestic and export markets, creating jobs, attracting investment and generating foreign exchange. By linking these projects, we ensure that aquaculture serves both the immediate needs of our people and the long-term growth of our economy. This is a holistic approach. Aquaculture as food, aquaculture as business and aquaculture as resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is also looking at strengthening its institutional capacity through capital investments that will drive this transformation. A total of $2 million has been allocated for upgrade of office buildings and quarters and $300,000 for quarters access, which will fully contribute to service delivery. We cannot undermine the importance of research when capturing the much-needed data, as this will aid in informed decisions. The allocation of research programmes such as the Pearl Oyster of $300,000, Fisheries Conservation $300,000 and Makogai Research and Development $350,000 will advance innovation and sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this budget reflects a careful balance. Reduction in operating lines ensures fiscal discipline, increases in capital lines ensure long-term growth and sustainability. This is a budget that tightens the belt today so that we can build capacity for tomorrow. It is a budget that invests in resilience, innovation and prosperity.

As we look ahead, the Ministry of Fisheries stands committed to ensuring that the prosperity of our nation flows from the strength of our oceans and the resilience of our people. This budget is not about figures, it is about families who depend mainly on fishing for their livelihood, communities whose culture is tied to the sea and a nation whose future depends on sustainable growth. We pledge to use every allocation wisely, transparently and with purpose to build stronger livelihoods, protect our marine resources and create opportunities that will endure.

Our vision is clear - a fisheries sector that is economically vibrant, environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive. I am pleased to share with this House that as of today, our budget utilisation rate sits at 90 percent, and we hope to achieve more than this come month's end. A truly responsible budget invests in sectors that generate long-term economic returns, protect national assets and improve the well-being of future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, forestry is one such sector. Our forests are not merely a source of timber, they are natural infrastructure, they secure our water supplies, protect our soils, support biodiversity, store carbon, strengthen climate resilience, create employment and sustain thousands of rural livelihoods. Every dollar invested in forestry today delivers dividends for generations to come. For these reasons, I acknowledge the continued confidence that Government has placed in the Ministry of Forestry through the allocation of $25.7 million under the 2026-2027 National Budget. In addition to this budgetary allocation, the Ministry of Forestry has also been proactively working with international donors to provide additional funds for some of its co-activities such as forest landscape restoration and climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Responsible budgeting requires us to view forestry, not as an expense, but as a long-term national investment. Healthy forests reduce future costs associated with flooding, erosion, water insecurity and climate impacts while generating sustainable economic activity through timber production, carbon finance, ecotourism and value-added processing. With 56 percent allocated to operating expenditure, and 44 percent to capital investment. This Budget of $25.7 million will allow the Ministry and the sector to respond to emerging challenges and new opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while contributing to GDP, the forestry sector supports thousands of jobs, contributes to export, supplies domestic construction, supports downstream manufacturing and reduces import dependence. One of the key priorities of this Budget, is the continued restoration of Fiji's forest landscapes through well-planned reforestation programmes that balance ecological restoration with economic development.

The allocation of $2 million for the reforestation of the Graded Forest Project represents a responsible investment that reduces future environmental liabilities. It demonstrates Government's commitment to reversing forest degradation while strengthening our country's natural capital, hence going beyond just planting trees. Fiji's national commitment to planting 30 million trees after 15 years continues to progress strongly, with over 27 million trees already planted to date. This achievement reflects the collective effort of landowners, communities, schools, faith-based organisations, development partners and citizens working together in environmental stewardship. I extend my heartfelt appreciation to each one of them.

In addition, the Ministry will continue working closely with Fiji Pine Limited and Fiji Hardwood Corporation to expand plantation development nationwide. While commercial plantations remain important for supporting the timber industry, equal emphasis is placed on indigenous species, fruit trees and non-wood forest products. This balanced approach strengthens the resilience of forests to enhance and maintain ecosystem health, supports biodiversity and enhances sustainable rural livelihoods across Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am also pleased to highlight the recent signing of the project agreement by the Ministry of Forestry on behalf of the Government of Fiji and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations for the Forest Landscape Restoration for Climate Benefits and Resilience Project. Valued at US$52 million and funded by the Green Climate Fund, this landmark initiative represents the largest investment ever made in forest landscape restoration in Fiji's forestry sector. This investment also demonstrates responsible fiscal management and every dollar secured from international climate finance reduces pressure on the National Budget while allowing Fiji to accelerate restoration, resilience and sustainable development.

Another important pillar of this budget is the Commercial Maritime Pine Subsidy. This remains as one of the most practical examples of Government's commitment to ensuring that development reaches every part of Fiji. For many years, geographic isolation has limited commercial potential of pine resources located within our maritime islands. Harvesting costs, transportation challenges and restricted market access have prevented many landowners from fully benefiting from their forest resources. The allocation of $2.5 million under this Budget directly addresses these barriers.

Through continued collaboration with Fiji Pine Limited and Tropik Wood Industries, maritime communities will now have greater opportunities to harvest, transport and market certified pine logs commercially. Mr. Speaker, Sir, equally important is the continued support for the Fiji Pine Trust through the allocation of $3.7 million which by far is the biggest funding to the Trust by the Fijian Government through the Ministry of Forestry. This Budget will support the development of infrastructure to facilitate economic activities and will also play a critical role in strengthening relationships with landowners, improving technical capacity and promoting greater participation in plantation management.

The Forestry Sector continues to demonstrate that environmental conservation and economic development can progress together. The allocation of $1.5 million for the Maritime Pine Development Project will continue supporting communities throughout Kadavu, Lau and Lomaiviti by expanding commercial forestry activities while improving household incomes. The benefits of these programmes extend well beyond timber production and contribute directly towards improving housing, education, healthcare, transportation and community infrastructure. These are tangible improvements that strengthen livelihoods and provide opportunities for future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government also continues to recognises the importance of empowering Mahogany resource owners. A total funding of $ 0.6 million allocated to the Fijian Mahogany Trust and the Fijian Mahogany Development Project will strengthen institutional support, improve engagement with landowners and expand awareness and capacity-building programmes throughout Mahogany's growing regions.

At the same time, the Ministry will continue supporting micro, small and medium-sized forestry enterprises through targeted subsidy programmes that reduce operating costs and current value-adding processing and strengthen domestic production. With a total budget allocation of $0.2 million, the Forest Subsidy Project is aimed at creating employment, stimulating entrepreneurship and contributing to a more resilient forestry industry that delivers benefits across the entire value-chain.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the budget also recognises that no sector can thrive without capable people leading it. As our forestry industry evolves, so too must the skills, knowledge and professionalism of those entrusted with managing one of Fiji's most valuable natural resources. The allocation of $0.8 million to upgrade the Forestry Training Centre in Colo-i-suva and $0.7 million for the Timber Industrial Training Centre in Nasinu represents far more than an infrastructure project. It is an investment in people.

Our modern forestry sector cannot rely solely on harvesting and plantation development. It is a long-term sustainability, and it depends on investment, strong investment in science, innovation and research to improve forest management, increase productivity and unlock new economic opportunities.

In recognition of this, the Ministry continues to strengthen its research and development programme through targeted investments that will shape the future direction of Fiji's forestry sector. Key priotity areas include the Sandal Wood Development Project which is allocated $0.2 million and focusses on improving propagation techniques, genetic quality, plantation management, sustainable harvesting and value-adding processes for one of Fiji's most high-value tree species.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Forestry Seed Centre is allocated $0.4 million and ensures a reliable supply of seeds and quality planting materials and the conservation of forest genetic resources. While the National Forest Insect Collection Centre is allocated $0.3 million and strengthens best identification, biodiversity research and forest health monitoring to protect plantations and enhance biosecurity.

The Ministry is also expanding research on both wood and non-wood forest products with an allocation of $0.2 million to maximise the economic value of Fiji's forests. Collectively, this research programme ensures that the Ministry is not only managing today's forests, but also building a knowledge-based innovation system and partnership needed for a more resilient and competitive forestry sector in the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2026-2027 National Budget continues to invest in upgrading forestry offices, staff quarters and access roads across the country, strengthening the Ministry's ability to develop quality services to landowners and communities. With a total budget allocation of one million dollars, this improvement will provide safer and more functional workplaces and enhance staff welfare and support our officers serving in rural and remote locations.

The recent enactment of the Forestry Act 2025 and Mahogany Act 2026 marks a significant milestone in strengthening forest governance. The budget support of $0.1 million for the review of the forest laws will facilitate the development and revision of associated regulations to implement these approved regulations. This will ensure strong legal protection of our forests, improve transparency in resource management and establish clearer responsibilities for our stakeholders.

The allocation of $0.2 million for the monitoring and surveillance of logging projects reinforces Government's commitment to safeguarding our forests through effective regulation and compliance. The Ministry will therefore continue to strengthen the monitoring systems, improving field inspections and enhancing compliance with approved harvesting plans and environmental standards.

The continued investment of $0.5 million in the REDD+ Project reflects Government's forward-looking approach to building new revenue streams while protecting our natural capital. An equally important priority is the completion of the National Forest Inventory, which is anticipated this year. Reliable scientific data is essential for informed decision-making. The inventory will provide an accurate assessment of the condition, extent, and composition of Fiji’s forest resources, enabling Government to plan more effectively, measure progress, and evidence-based policy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, conservation and development should never be viewed as competing priorities. When managed responsibly, protected forests create economic opportunities while preserving the natural heritage upon which future generations depend. An allocation of $0.4 million for the upgrade of forest parks project will continue to improve the management of existing forest parks while supporting the establishment of additional community-managed conservation areas throughout the country. For the past two years, the Ministry has been establishing at least two community-based forest parks each year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in closing. A responsible budget is one that looks beyond the next financial year. It invests in people, it invests in communities, it protects national assets. It prepares the country for future challenges. It creates opportunities for future generations. This budget achieves precisely that, through responsible investment in sustainable forestry, the Government is protecting forestry while strengthening rural livelihoods, expanding economic opportunities, building climate resilience, and positioning Fiji to participate in the emerging green economy.

The Ministry of Forestry remains fully committed to ensuring that every dollar entrusted to us will leave a measurable outcome for our people and lasting value for our nation. I am also pleased to inform this august House, that the current budget utilisation rate for the Ministry of Forestry is 89.6 percent, and we hope to achieve more than this comes the month end.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let this Budget be remembered as one that placed people at its heart and the future as its horizon. Together we will ensure that Fiji's fisheries and forestry sector not only sustain us today, but prospers tomorrow, securing a legacy of abundance, resilience, and hope for generations to come. I therefore fully support this responsible Budget for a sustainable future and commend it to this august House.

MR. SPEAKER.- We can all understand that that confusion can easily arise between the speaker and any species of your fish in your portfolio.

(Laughter)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the National Budget Estimate delivered for 2026-2027 financial year.

The honourable Minister's theme for this Budget is "*A Responsible Budget for Sustainable Future*." Mr. Speaker, Sir, budgets are not judged by their titles, they are judged by their numbers which I will use to argue that the 2026-2027 Budget is irresponsible as far as the economic figures are concerned.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if this is a responsible budget, does it make the previous three budgets presented by the honourable former Minister for Finance irresponsible, or is the Government now admitting that its fiscal strategy over the past three years was fundamentally flawed? Does the honourable Minister believe that the substantial increases in Government expenditure and operating expenditure over the past three financial years were fiscally irresponsible? If not, what exactly distinguishes this budget from the previous three to justify the label "responsible"?

The fiscal projections raise further doubts that this is not a responsible budget. The deficit is projected at 6.4 percent of GDP in this financial year and remains significantly elevated to 7 percent in 2026-2027. Excluding the extraordinary COVID-19 budgets, these are among the highest deficits recorded under Fiji's fiscal responsibility framework.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, only a year ago, Parliament was told that the budget deficit for 2026-2027 financial year would be 4 percent of GDP, and five months ago, the medium-term fiscal strategy revised that figure to 5 percent. Today, Parliament is being asked to approve a deficit of 7 percent of GDP.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- So, how is this a responsible budget when the deficit is increasing? What objective standard is the Minister applying to call this a responsible budget? Or is "responsible" simply a convenient label designed to disguise the Government's poor fiscal record?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if a family plans to overspend by $5,000, but later finds the shortfall has grown to $7,000, no one will call that responsible financial management. They would say the family is living beyond its means. That is precisely the position of this Government. Economic growth projections presented in this Budget requires much closer scrutiny. Economic growth under this Coalition Government has lost momentum.

Growth has been revised down to 3 percent last year, is projected to slow further to just 1.5 percent this year – the weakest performance in five years - and next year's forecast has also been lowered. These downward revisions raise a fundamental question: why is economic growth slowing despite the Government's repeated claims of a strong investment pipeline worth $8.9 billion and a favourable business environment, which even the honourable Prime Minister just mentioned?

Pipeline figures look great, but a pipeline does not grow the economy - actual investments, actual construction, actual production, and actual job creation do. After three-and-a-half years in government, Fijians are entitled to ask, where are the economic results from the investment pipeline? And I hope Honourable Kamikamica will respond to that. If the investment pipeline is as strong as they claimed, why has it not translated into higher growth?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government also points to increased public investment as evidence of its economic management, but the facts tell a different story. Capital expenditure as a share of GDP remains below the levels achieved under the Bainimarama Government. At that time, many of the private sector projects being presented as achievements of this Government were initiated, approved, or already underway before 2023. A government cannot claim credit simply because it inherited projects and later announced them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, economic leadership is measured by the ability to create new investment, accelerate implementation, remove barriers, and deliver results.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- It is not the number of announcements made, but the promises made in the budget speech. It is whether businesses are investing, whether productivity is improving, whether jobs are being created, and whether households are feeling the benefits. The evidence before us is clear - slower growth, downward revisions of forecasts, and weaker capital investments do not support the Government's optimistic narrative. The Government must explain why, after three-and-a half years, its promised investment momentum has not translated into stronger economic performance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the 2023 Budget debate, the former Minister for Finance, honourable Professor Biman Prasad, spoke about reducing government expenditure and public debt by almost $1 billion - and I ask honourable Members to revisit the *Daily Hansard.* Those commitments were presented as the foundation for the Government's fiscal strategy. Now we see that Government has drifted away from that strategy.

HON. J. USAMATE. - Very Poor!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- This Budget alone increases public debt by $1.4 billion. Yet we are asked to believe it is a responsible budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the end of this Government's term in office, Fiji's debt is projected to have increased by approximately $3.4 billion. That is more than what the previous government borrowed in the COVID-19 pandemic to protect lives and to keep the economy afloat. So, the question is, what is this Government's justification for borrowing? Where is the fiscal restraint promised? The Budget itself provides the answer.

Public debt is rising because this Government keeps borrowing to sustain itself. Fijians are not paying more in taxes to fund a bigger government while they continue waiting for basic infrastructure and essential services. Mr. Speaker, Sir, 82 percent of total expenditure is allocated to salaries, wages, utilities and day-to-day running of Government, and only 18 percent is allocated for capital investment - and this share will continue to fall because our debt is rising. Unlike during the Bainimarama Government where 70 percent was for operational, and 30 percent for capital works. So, when people are asking for schools, electricity, roads and bridges, the Government has limited funds to deliver these.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last financial year, capital expenditure was budgeted at $926.6 million, later revised to $792 million, with $135 million unutilised. So, we can hear a long list of projects that will be done by this Budget, but when we go through the Budget Supplement, we can see actually what you have delivered.

For this Budget, capital expenditure is further reduced to $876 million, with no time on hand to deliver these projects because the election is looming. What does 18 percent capital allocation mean? It means a growing share of borrowed money is supporting consumption rather than creating productive assets that will expand the economy, generate future revenue, and improve Fiji's productive capacity. So, I ask the honourable Minister, how can this be described as a responsible budget when debt is rising, capital investment is declining, and a larger portion of borrowing is being used to sustain fixed expenses rather than build a nation's future?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is further confirmed by the Government's own operating cash position. The Budget records a negative operating cash flow of approximately $177 million. In simple terms, Government's revenue is no longer sufficient to meet its operating expenses, and that is the reality! This situation is a direct result of policy choices the Government made without understanding how money works!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely!

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- They came to govern the country with no sound policies and no sound plans - and today, the consequences of their policy choices are evident through high public debt.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the Government's earliest major fiscal decision was the write-off of approximately $600 million in student debt. Whatever our views are on this decision, it added approximately $600 million to the Government's liabilities overnight, increasing the burden on public finances. Going forward, every year, the Government must fork out about $160 million for free tertiary education, and this number will continue to increase. Since that policy choice, Government borrowing has increased by more than $2 billion, and this Budget proposes a further increase in public debt.

Similarly, the Government significantly expanded the number of tertiary scholarships by lowering the qualifying cut-off marks and substantially increasing the pass rates for Year 12 and Year 13 students. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am not questioning the policy objective of expanding access to higher education, I am questioning its fiscal sustainability or affordability. Even Australia and New Zealand cannot afford this. They are the ones who are supporting our Budget. Yet, without any money in our pocket, we want to do all these things. Can Fiji afford to continue expanding fully funded tertiary scholarships when public debt continues to rise? Economic growth is slowing, and the Government itself says reducing the fiscal deficit has become an economic necessity. These are the difficult questions this Government must answer.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the past three-and-a-half years, this Government has significantly expanded the size of civil service by 50 percent, resulting in a huge wage bill. The question is not whether the Government needs more public servants. The question is whether Fiji can afford an ever-expanding public service. My question is, do we need Government to undertake functions that could be delivered more efficiently by the private sector? The fundamental role of Government is to provide essential public goods and services that the private sector cannot provide, not to expand the size of the public service where more cost-effective alternatives exist.

The challenge facing Fiji is restoring fiscal discipline by correcting policy choices that have weakened the country's financial position. A responsible government borrows when there is clear economic returns. What are we borrowing for? And are we creating enough revenue to repay this debt? This should concern every member of this House, because debt is not just a number on the Government's balance sheet. Debt has consequences. As debt rises, so does the cost of servicing that debt. Now, debt servicing stands at $1.481 billion, whereas in the 2022-2023 financial year, it stood at $743.5 million after COVID-19 borrowing, so the debt servicing has doubled.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, every additional dollar spent on interest payment is a dollar that cannot be spent on infrastructure and services that directly benefit our people. The warning signs are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has assessed Fiji's public debt as remaining high and is subject to elevated risks. These assessments raise a fundamental question: if debt was truly on a firm downward trajectory as the Government and the Fiscal Review Committee assured the public, why does IMF continue to identify public debt as a significant fiscal risk?

We cannot continue to rely on optimistic projections while debt continues to rise and interest costs consume a larger share of Government revenue. Fiscal responsibility is not measured by promises made in budget speeches, it is measured by results, and the results are clear - higher debt, higher interest costs, increased borrowing and a more vulnerable fiscal position. The Government increased direct and indirect taxes on the pretext of reducing public debt. Instead, the debt has continued to increase.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- It is time for the Government to acknowledge these realities and present a credible plan to restore fiscal discipline and rebuild fiscal resilience before it is too late.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government came to office on three clear economic promises: to reduce the cost of living; eliminate wasteful government spending; and place Fiji on the path to lower public debt.

After almost four years in office, what is their record? The cost of living has substantially increased, families are facing higher prices, higher taxes, and increased pressure on household budgets. The Government's wasteful spending has continued. Operating expenditure has expanded from $3.6 billion in 2023 to $4.9 billion projected for this budget, with a larger cabinet size, more ministries, increased administrative costs, and limited evidence of the promised efficiency gains.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another disturbing feature of this Government's term, has been the growing number of legal challenges involving the State. This budget has a special allocation of $4.4 million for court orders and legal settlements, compared to $300,000 in the last two budgets. That extraordinary increase is the price of poor decision-making and also for not following the rule of law. The Coalition Government inherited an economy with a strong recovery, where Fiji was ranked the fifth-fastest-growing economy in the world. By 2023, Fiji's economy recovered to pre-pandemic levels. That is on record in your book.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government's responsibility....

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- ...was to build on that momentum. Instead, it imposed austerity measures that weakened the very condition that supported economic growth, and that was the start of our downhill. Much of the hardship we are witnessing today is the direct result of the former Minister for Finance's decision to experiment with the lives of ordinary Fijians, relying on the recommendations of the Kalavata Economic Review Committee and his hand-picked advisors. Despite a strong economic recovery, the Government chose higher taxes and fiscal tightening over policies to stimulate investment, create jobs, and sustain growth, which slowed the recovery and left Fiji with higher debt and a weaker economy. Today, the Government's own budget confirms many of the concerns raised by this side of the House.

The most revealing part of this Budget is not the Minister's speech but Chapter Four of the Economic and Fiscal Update. Please, go and read Chapter Four.

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

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- The Minister's own budget says, spending has become unproductive. I am not saying the Minister's own budget says that. His own budget says capital investment has been crowded out. His own budget says that tax increases have pushed up the cost of living, and that the VAT reduction is not reflected in retail prices. His own budget says Fiji has failed to build fiscal buffers with rising revenues when we heard that $4 billion collection was made by FRCS. His own budget says borrowing is becoming more difficult, and his own budget says that deficit reduction is no longer a choice, it is an economic necessity, and I think we should listen to the Minister more carefully.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is a remarkable admission of failure over the past three budgets. I do not envy the current honourable Minister for Finance for having to inherit this situation. To his credit, this Budget presents a more realistic assessment of Fiji's fiscal challenges than we have seen in recent years. As this budget draws to a close this week, let us return to the central question before Parliament – is this truly a responsible budget for sustainable future? The honourable Minister for Finance cannot dispute his own budget supplement. He cannot deny what is in Chapter Four, and that is not the Opposition's verdict. The Government's income can no longer pay for Government's operations – as simple as that.

It is projected that the Government will add $3.5 billion to the national debt without delivering the transformational investments desperately needed. And now Government budgets $4.4 million for legal settlements due to poor governance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my seat, I acknowledge the Governor and the team at Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) for maintaining prudent monetary policy, and I commend the CEO and the staff of the Fiji Revenue and Customs Services (FRCS) for their strong revenue collection efforts. They worked really hard to collect every dollar. I also thank the Permanent Secretary for Finance and his team for preparing the budget documents. Their professionalism is not in question. The real failure lies in political leadership.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Unless this Government changes course, the economic challenges facing Fiji will not only become more severe and more costly, but it will also go worse.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister said, why are we not talking about the debt-to-GDP ratio. Let us talk about it. What does it mean? When we talk about debt, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lower debt-to-GDP ratio does not mean Fiji's debt has gone down, or we have paid the debt. The debt-to-GDP ratio simply compares two things - how much money the Government owes and the size of the economy. So, the ratio can fall if the economy grows faster than the debt, and the ratio can increase when the debt increases and the economy slows down - that is currently the situation. That is why the debt-to-GDP ratio has gone up to 84 percent.

Let me just give them their own figure. January of 2023, go and check the books! The debt-to-GDP ratio came down to 79.9 percent. You had just entered the Parliament. Did you pay the debt? Did you do anything? No, you did not! Why? Because during that time the borders opened, the economy took off, the businesses started and the money started coming in. So, automatically the debt-to-GDP reduced – debt-to-GDP when it comes down, it does not mean you have paid the debt. The debt is still there! Unless this Government changes course, as I said, the economic challenges facing Fiji will only become more severe and costly, and for these reasons, I cannot support this Budget.

MR. SPEAKER.- Given the speaker, I was expecting a more boisterous response or interruptions, maybe keeping silence is a good strategy, and then a Member will have his or her response when their turn comes up.

HON. A. BIA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, and to everyone listening throughout Fiji, *ni sa bula vinaka* and greetings to you all. I rise today in support of the 2026-2027 National Budget, appropriately themes "*A Responsible Budget for Sustainable Future*."

At the outset, I congratulate the honourable Prime Minister, and also the honourable Minister for Finance and the dedicated staff for presenting a budget that seeks to strengthen Fiji's economy while continuing to invest in the wellbeing of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the budget has been prepared at a time when the global economy remains uncertain. Many countries continue to face inflationary pressures, volatile markets, high fuel prices and the increasing impacts of climate change. These challenges have affected Governments around the world and Fiji as a small island developing State has not been immune to those crises. Against this backdrop, Government has been required to make difficult choices.

Every budget involves balancing immediate national priorities with long-term fiscal responsibility. It requires careful judgement, prudent management, and a clear understanding that every dollar invested today must contribute to a stronger and more resilient Fiji tomorrow. That is why this budget deserves to be assessed not simply by the size of its allocations, but by the opportunity it creates and the confidence it gives our people about the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as this Parliament term gradually draws to a close, I have also taken time to reflect not only on this national budget, but also on the way, we as Members of Parliament approach these annual debates. Having now participated in three budget debates, and also as one of the youngest Members of this august House, I have the privilege of listening to the experienced Members from both Government and Opposition. Those debates have reminded me that Parliament performs its best when different ideas are examined with honesty, respect, and a genuine desire to improve the lives of our people.

Debate is fundamental to democracy. We, as Government, have a responsibility to explain our policies and justify the decisions we have made. The Opposition have an equally important responsibility to scrutinise those decisions and hold Government accountable for the use of public resources. Both roles are essential because they strengthen public confidence in our democratic institutions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my reflection however, goes beyond the debate itself. I have come to appreciate that every budget discussion should begin with a simple question. What matters most to the people who entrusted us with their votes? That question should shape every contribution we make in this Chamber. It should remind us that behind every allocation, every policy and every programme is a family hoping for greater security, a young person looking for opportunity, a business striving to grow, and a community working towards a better future.

As the Assistant Minister for Youth and Sports, I am particularly mindful that many of those expectations rest with our younger generation. Young Fijians are not simply waiting for opportunities. They are preparing themselves to contribute to our nation's future. They want access to quality education, relevant skills, meaningful employment, and positive pathways through sports, leadership, and community service. The decisions we make in this august House today will influence whether those aspirations become reality. It is with that perspective, that I offer my contributions to this budget debate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we debate a national budget, it is easy to become absorbed in figures, appropriations, and physical projections. While these are essential to sound financial management, they are not what most Fijians remember when the debate is over. What they remember, is whether this budget gives them confidence that tomorrow, can be better than today. Across our country, families are asking practical questions. Can they continue to meet the rising cost of living everyday? Will there be stable employment and new opportunities for those entering the workforce? Will their children receive the education and training needed to build successful lives? Will healthcare remain accessible when they need it the most? Those are not abstract economic questions - they are the realities that shape daily life for thousands of Fijians throughout the country.

For many young people the questions are equally important. They are asking whether their hard work at school or through vocational training will lead to meaningful employment? They want opportunities to develop their talents, contribute to their communities and build independent lives. They are looking for pathways that reward effort, encourage innovation and give them confidence to remain and invest in Fiji's future. That is why investments in youth development are not simply social programmes. They are investments in national productivity, social stability and long-term economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the same principle applies to sports. Sports is often recognised for the pride it brings to our nation on the international stage. But its greatest contribution begins much closer to home. It teaches discipline, teamwork and resilience. It keeps young people engaged in positive activities. It promotes healthier communities and creates opportunities for leadership, inclusion and national unity. Every investment we make in community sport, athletic development and sporting infrastructure is also an investment in stronger families and stronger communities. That is why I welcome this Budget-continued commitment to both youth and sports, recognising that these sectors are not expenses to be managed, but strategic investment in Fiji’s future.

No budget can meet every expectation, nor can it resolve every challenge within a single financial year. The responsibility of this Government is to establish clear priorities, allocate resources responsibly and create the conditions for progress. Our responsibility as Members of Parliament is also equally important. We must examine those priorities carefully and ensure that public resources are used effectively and encourage continuous improvement in the delivery of public services.

Constructive scrutiny should strengthen policy, not weaken public confidence. Likewise, constructive support should encourage good decisions while recognising that every government must remain accountable for the commitment it makes. When we approach our responsibility in that spirit, the great beneficiaries are not Government or Opposition. The greatest beneficiaries are the people of Fiji.

That, Mr. Speaker, Sir, should always remain the purpose of our deliberations in this august House. Ultimately, the success of any budget is determined not by the announcement made in this Chamber, but by the outcomes experienced in our community. Our programme is only successful when it reaches the people it was intended to serve. A policy has value only when it delivers measurable improvement, and allocation achieves its purpose only when it is translated into action. That is why implementation matters to this Government. It requires strong leadership, capable public institutions, responsible financial management, and regular evaluation to ensure that resources are producing the results Parliament intended. As a government, we have a responsibility not only to approve programmes, but also to ensure they are delivered efficiently, transparently, and in a way that earns the confidence of the people of Fiji.

Throughout our history, Fiji has faced many challenges. We have experienced natural disasters, economic shocks, and periods of uncertainty that have tested our resilience as a nation. Yet each time, our people have demonstrated remarkable courage and determination. We see that resilience every day. We see it in farmers who continue to cultivate the land despite difficult seasons. We see it in fishermen, who provide for their families through dedication and hard work. We see it in entrepreneurs who continue investing in their businesses, despite changing economic conditions. We see it in teachers, who save future generations, healthcare workers who care for our communities, and parents who make sacrifices every day, so that their children may have opportunities they themselves, have never enjoyed. Their perseverance reminds us that nation building is not a responsibility of Government alone. It is a shared responsibility.

Government creates the policy environment. Businesses create investment and employment. Communities provide support and belonging. Families nurture values and aspirations. Together, these partnerships build a stronger Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is why our investment in young people deserves special attention. The future strength of our nation will not be measured solely by economic indicators or infrastructure projects. It will be measured by the capability, character and confidence of our next generation. When a young person acquires a new skill, secures meaningful employment, starts a business or chooses to contribute positively to society, the benefits extend far beyond that individual. Families become stronger, communities become more resilient. Our economy becomes more productive.

Similarly, when sport encourages a healthy lifestyle, promotes inclusion and inspires excellence, it contributes to outcomes that extend well beyond the playing field. It develops discipline, strengthens social cohesion and creates role models who inspire others to pursue their own ambitions. These are lasting investments that continue to deliver benefits long after the financial year has ended.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for these reasons, I welcome the continued commitment in this budget to programmes that expand opportunities for our young people, strengthen community participation and promote sporting development throughout Fiji. These investments reflect an understanding that sustainable development is achieved not only through economic growth, but also through developing capable, healthy and engaged citizens.

As we move into the new financial year, our collective responsibility is clear. We must ensure that commitments contained in our budget are implemented effectively, monitored carefully and reviewed honestly. That is how we transform appropriations into outcomes, policies into progress and public confidence into lasting national development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I return to the simple question I posed earlier. What matters most to the people of Fiji? Ultimately, they want a country where hard work is rewarded, where young people have genuine opportunities to succeed, where families can look to the future with confidence, and where government continues to act responsibly in managing the nation's resources. Those aspirations are shared across every province, every community and every generation. They also remind us that the decisions we make in this august House carry responsibilities far beyond our parliamentary term. Every budget is an investment in the kind of Fiji we hope to leave to those who come after us. It is therefore our duty to ensure that today's decisions strengthen tomorrow's opportunities.

I am particularly encouraged that this budget continues to recognise the important role of our young people in shaping our nation's future. Young Fijians are not merely beneficiaries of government programmes. They are innovators, volunteers, entrepreneurs, athletes, community leaders and future decision makers. When we invest in their education, strength and skills development, encourage entrepreneurship and create pathways through sport, we are investing in the leadership, productivity and resilience of Fiji itself.

Equally, our continued support for sports reflects an understanding that success is measured not only by medals won on the international stage, but also by stronger communities, healthier lifestyles and the values of discipline, teamwork and respect that sports help to instil in our people. These investments whose returns will be measured over by generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no budget is ever perfect. Every budget requires choices. Every budget reflects the realities of its time. What matters is that we continue to listen, continue to improve and continue to ensure that public resources are managed with integrity, transparency and accountability. That is how confidence is built, that is how trust is earned, and that is how we strengthen partnership between government and the people that we are privileged to serve. The Fiji we build today, depends on the decisions we make today.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, please allow me to respond to some of the members of the Opposition who have spoken before me – continue to refer to the last Government's achievements. As we continue this budget debate throughout this week, these have been my observations, which I believe people outside this chamber have even heard enough of it during this parliamentary term. Too often when we have budget debates, we hear members of the Opposition spend a great deal of time reminding the nation of what the previous Government achieved years ago.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is nothing wrong with acknowledging past accomplishments. Every government leaves behind policies, projects and reforms that have contributed to the country's development. Those achievements deserve recognition when it is due. However, the responsibility of the Coalition Government today is not simply to celebrate the past. It is to address the present and prepare for the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fijians who voted for us in Parliament are not asking us to recite a list of yesterday's achievements. They are asking us how today's decision will improve their lives. Fijians want to know how they will cope with the cost of living? How will they find employment? How will their children receive a quality education? How will they put food on the table? Our debates should reflect those concerns.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we spend too much time looking backwards, we risk overlooking the challenges that require our attention today. Fijians expect Parliament to examine the current budget, assess where the public resources are being used effectively, and consider what more can be done to strengthen the economy and improve essential services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, past achievements can provide useful context, but they should not become a substitute for explaining current policies or responding to current challenges. As we respond to the National Budget, address all of us, regardless of which side you are on in this office, remember that leadership is not measured only by what was accomplished yesterday. It is also measured by how we respond to the needs of the people today and how we prepare our nation for tomorrow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian people deserve honest answers, practical solutions, and respectful debate. Fijians deserve representatives who spend more time discussing opportunities and solutions than defending records or assigning blame.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we as Members of Parliament must remember that our duty extends beyond election cycles. Whether we sit on Government benches or in the Opposition, we are all entrusted with representing the interests of the people. To the people of our nation, let me say this, continue to make your voices heard, share your experiences, participate in your communities, and hold of us, regardless of political parties or status, have a high standard of service and accountability. With that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the Budget.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I think now is a convenient time to take our lunch break. Our deliberation is suspended, and the House will resume in one-and-a-half hours.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.58 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.37 p.m.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the Fijians watching, thank you for your time. I rise today with responsibility and a deep sense of duty, and being the voice of the Fijians elected as a Member of Parliament, twice by the people in 2018 and again in 2022.

This afternoon, I am fortunate, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that time is allocated to me for the contribution towards the National Budget Estimates 2026-2027. Today, I want to tell about my vision for a fairer, freer, and better Fiji for all - a Fiji where life is affordable; a Fiji where we have cheap and abundant energy; a Fiji where industry thrives and business booms; a Fiji where we innovate, make and build things of ambition, and farm and mine determination; a Fiji where a single income earner on an ordinary wage has enough for a home deposit to pay off a mortgage steadily; a Fiji where a mum or dad can afford to take time away from work to do the most worthwhile thing in life, raise a child; a Fiji where those we welcome to our shores are all, determined to embrace our values, to work hard, to contribute to this nation and to become a Fijian; a Fiji where we have confidence in our nation's future; and a Fiji where we have hope. This is not the Fiji we know today, but we have known it and we can know it again.

We can restore our standard of living and protect our way of life by choosing the ideology and principles that are simple with equal citizenry to all Fijians. No false hope, no election promise. Our focus should be entirely on improving the living standards o=f our people and building a prosperous Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget Estimates for the fiscal year 2026-2027 is a burden on families where large fiscal deficit of $3.82 billion in revenue against $4.87 billion expenditure, leaving a deficit around $1 billion, about 7 percent of GDP. Where is the promise by the Coalition Government to reduce debt, as it is continuously increasing in every budget?

Operating expenses and capital expenses: If we compare, this Coalition Government has been significantly increasing the operating expenses and reducing capital expenditure. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have seen that the Coalition Government has been reducing the capital expenditure from 2023 until now. In the 2023-2024 Budget, its operating expense was $3.07 billion to $1.02 billion capital expenditure. In 2024-2025 National Budget its operating expense further increased to $3.24 billion, while capital expenditure remained almost the same.

In the 2025-2026 Budget, operating expenses further increased to $3.91 billion while the capital expenditure declined to $926.6 million. Projected for 2026-2027, the National Budget the operating expense will further increase to $3.99 billion while capital expenditure will further decline to $876 million. The reason for all this is because of large ministerial portfolios which leads to more Government vehicles for ministers and assistant ministers, salary, office accommodation space, and more staffing for them, and overseas travelling and hefty overseas per diem.

Other factors related to large operating expenses such as Government vehicles accidents which has been the most in this Coalition Government. If our nation's capital expenditure keeps on declining and operating expenses increase significantly, it simply indicates that Government is relying too much on consumption expenditure. This will not only widen the debt trap but will increase the deficit and will be a direct burden on our future generations. If Government reduces its operating expenses and increases the capital expenditure, we can have more infrastructure, more developments, and will bring positive investor confidence which will lead to more employment and more revenue.

Neglected Sugar Industry: Mr. Speaker, Sir, Sugar Industry and sugarcane farmers are the most neglected Fijians under the Government. Once the backbone of the country, these people are completely forgotten. Where is the $110 per tonne promise by one of the Coalition partners of the present Government? The Government should listen to the plight of farmers and should diversify to other crops for its survival.

Agricultural Sector: Fiji as a resource rich nation, but it is importing four times more food than exporting. Though Fiji has significantly increased its exporting capacity but is still far behind. Though the Ministry of Agriculture has a fair budget, it needs modernised infrastructure and logistics such as:

- Cold chain storage — build solar powered cold hubs at main jetties and markets to stop post-harvest rot.
- All-weather farm roads — upgrade rural access roads so farmers can move vegetable crops during heavy rain. The present Government is unable to fix the Queens Highway at Semo, which is taking them almost a year. If it was the previous government, the road would have been fixed within one month. How can we expect rural farm roads to be upgraded to all-weather roads from this Government?
- Digital marketplaces — launch mobile platforms connecting rural farmers directly with hotels and supermarkets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government should reform land use and finance such as streamlined land leasing — partner with the iTaukei Land Trust Board to create long-term, secure and easily renewable agricultural leases and levy market rental on leased land, which will benefit all stakeholders. The 2013 Fijian Constitution Section 29(4) mandates that all land leases must provide a fair and equitable return to the landowners, while balancing just fair and reasonable terms for the tenants. Also, to get flexible agro-insurance with FDB to protect farmers from cyclones and youth start-up grants.

Mr. Speaker Sir, Fiji Development Bank's (FDB) core focus should be in the development of the agricultural sector and in helping farmers and not just purchasing investment properties as they have started doing so. The purchase of Tanoa Apartments is a good example, and it seems that FDB board has left the poor farmers betrayed for whom this bank was established.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have been reliably informed that there is an arrangement to purchase a land in Nadi by FDB to build a bank, while there is an existing bank in Nadi. These are the wrong decisions of the board, and I request the honourable Minister for Finance to look into this matter.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to improve feeders' productivity and drive inclusive economic growth, we must unlock the full potential of iTaukei land, not by owning more land, but by developing what we already have. Much of the land can remain undeveloped or underutilised, not because of lack of land, but due to lack of infrastructure, capital, administration and access to markets as earlier stated. The iTaukei land can contribute to agricultural expansion, as it is ideal for commercial agriculture and food security. Maintaining food security is a fundamental pillar of national stability, public health, and economic productivity.

Affordable Housing: Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is facing severe affordable housing crisis though it has a budget of $3 million to help new homeowners. The reason is due to rapid urbanisation, limited land supply, skyrocketing building material costs, and an escalating supply and demand mismatch. Though Fiji has abundant of land, but due to lease problems, such as non-renewal is a major factor where the tenants and landowners both lose out.

The iTaukei Land Trust Board, who are the custodians of iTaukei land, should be proactive in dealing with landowning units by offering fair and equitable returns, and the landowners can lease their land for a longer term. Rather than capitalising on the resources they already have, the management of iTaukei Land Trust Board is trying to secure more land (State and freehold) which is not their responsibility and role. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji will be losing investor confidence, if the Government or iTLTB starts conversion of State land and Freehold land into *mataqali* land and tries to change the same in the constitution amendment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the State Land which is under the Ministry of Land and Mineral Resources is only 4 percent, but it covers prime urban, industrial, commercial, and agricultural zones. TLTB can do the same for a better return for landowners at expansion of our economy. If we compare the rental revenue of both land types, Ministry of Land, State land with four percent generates more revenue than iTaukei land in comparison, which consists of 91 percent of iTaukei land in Fiji.

To utilise our resources more efficiently, the iTaukei Land Trust Board and management should encourage landowning units to give land to lease out for a longer term with a market rental where both lessee and lessor will benefit. This will benefit our housing, agriculture, and tourism sector, and it will create more employment and will also generate more revenue for our Government.

Local Government: Mr. Speaker, Sir, presently the areas of rates stand somewhere around $71 million, which is not a good sign of this Government. This is happening because of poor service delivery by councils. Look at the Nasinu Town Council, whose service delivery needs much improvement, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Rubbish is an eyesore on the roadsides, overgrown grass leads to breeding grounds for mosquitoes and spreading of diseases and nasty smells. We need qualified people to look after the councils, not the lost candidates of political parties.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Extra burden by the Coalition Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, though this Government increased VAT, they were able to reduce the Debt deficit and also there were no subsidies on fuel, as they did not have any long-term planning. However, the Government was able to plan to increase the size of the Cabinet, wasting money on COI report, court cases which is an unnecessary expense for our taxpayers.

Our Fijians are suffering every day, however, this Government has nothing new to offer. If this Government is serious about easing pressure, then bring back the VAT to 9 percent, remove VAT from all essential food and medicine. Do not balance the national budget on the backs of the poor.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reduction in the FNPF Employer contribution rate undermines workers' financial security by directly diminishing their long-term retirement savings and eroding future financial stability. The Government is not assisting the private sector by reducing the employer's contribution by 2 percent, but Government is trying to save itself as it cannot afford to pay the difference because of it large civil service size.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, everywhere I go around Viti Levu, I hear the same stories, frustration and lack of confidence in this government. People are not asking for miracles. They are asking for fairness in the economic development of the country. They want their roads fixed, their water to run, their children to go to school without being turned away for fees.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I came to serve the people of Fiji, and I remain committed to working with integrity, with consistency, and with the kind of honesty that Fijians are yearning for in their leaders.

Let us move away from politics of division and deception. Let us lead with compassion, truth and courage.

(Laughter)

This country is at a crossroads. The challenges are real, and the solutions will not come from more committees, slogans, or changing the Constitution. We need bold leadership, rooted in service. We need real economic reform, honest land lease solution, and budgets that reflect empathy, not election strategy. Not a bigger Government, a better Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we restore and expand people's choices, we can begin to restore our standard of living and protect our way of life. I know Fijians are worried about the state of our cherished country, but if we work together in nation-building, we can achieve milestones and create a brighter future for everyone.

Before I end my speech, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for Finance and the PS, Mr. Shiri Gounder and his team, for the effort in compiling this Budget. Thank you and God bless our beloved nation.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament; I rise today in this august House to deliver my response to the 2026-2027 National Budget. I would like to congratulate the honourable Minister for Finance for delivering his first national budget. I also commend him for delivering a responsible, disciplined and forward-looking budget at a time when Fiji is trying to navigate significant domestic and global economic challenges.

This morning, when we hear the key response from the shadow Minister for Finance, we can see that we have a confused Opposition and they have been singing different tunes and they are not sure whether they are going or coming. The honourable Leader of the Opposition tried to put his parliamentary statement ahead this morning and tried to critic, but at the end he fell into playing some cheap political point scoring at the end.

Honourable Bala took the stand and walked across the floor. As we all know, the Opposition is made up of two parties. One is the Fijians First Party and the other one is the One Nation Party and I hope they are not chasing for the same piece of cake when they will campaign for the same voters but, again, Sir, back to my Budget address, the theme is *A Responsible Budget For Sustainable Future*. It perfectly captures the difficult yet necessary choices before us as a nation. This budget recognises that sustainable development cannot be achieved through excessive spending or short-term political expediency. Rather, it requires responsible fiscal management, strategic investment, sound governance and unwavering commitment to improving the lives of every Fijian. This principle resonates strongly with the work of the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our budget acknowledges the fiscal realities confronting our nation while continuing to invest in sectors that generate long-term social and economic returns. It demonstrates that even with a constrained fiscal space, Government remains committed in ensuring that development reaches every community, every village, every settlement and every island across Fiji.

For those of us entrusted in serving the rural and rural maritime communities, this budget carries a particular significance. It reinforces the Coalition Government's commitment that geography must never determine opportunity. It recognises that our rural and maritime communities are not simply beneficiaries of Government programmes. They are the backbone of our nation, contributing to agriculture, fisheries, culture and economic growth. They are the home of thousands of hardworking farmers, fishermen, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we recognise the importance of managing expenditure, growth, and restoring long-term fiscal sustainability. While fiscal responsibility must continue to be balanced with the need to invest in areas that generate lasting, social-economic benefits, investment in rural development, disaster risk reduction, climate resilience, and community infrastructure are not simple expenditures. They are measures that reduce future costs, protect livelihoods, and strengthen the ability of communities to withstand shocks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we believe that by investing wisely today, Government is building a stronger and more resilient future for Fiji tomorrow. We support Government's commitment in maintaining expenditure discipline over the medium term, while ensuring that essential services and development priorities are protected. Moving forward, efficiency, innovation, and strong coordination across Government will be key to achieving the better outcome with available resources.

For the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Risk Management this means continuing to improve programme delivery, strengthening partnerships with communities and development partners and ensuring that investments are targeted towards initiatives that create sustainable impact for rural and maritime communities across Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we welcome Government's continued focus on increasing capital investment, particularly in critical infrastructure, that strengthen people's service delivery and improves the quality of life of our people. From the perspective of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Risk Management, investment in resilient infrastructure is fundamental to reducing vulnerabilities and supporting sustainable development. Projects such as flood mitigation, water infrastructure, road connectivity, and community facilities directly contribute to safer and more accessible communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we acknowledge the importance of major infrastructure investments and the role of strong partnerships in advancing Fiji's development aspirations. While large-scale projects continue to significantly contribute to economic growth, it equally is important that development continues to reach our rural and maritime communities. Through collaboration with the development partners, Government agencies, and stakeholders, we must continue to strengthen the infrastructure and support inclusive growth, including our rural connectivity and maritime services, climate resilience, and disaster reduction. The support of our development partners remains invaluable in ensuring technical capacity, mobilising resources, and ensuring that Fiji's infrastructure development is sustainable, resilient, and responsive to the needs of all communities, including those in most remote areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at a time when national issues are increasingly the subject of public discussion, I respectfully urge all Members to ensure that Fiji's national debt is approached with responsibility, balance, and objectivity. The debt we carry today reflects the investments made over many years, including those undertaken to respond to the unprecedented challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters, and development of critical national infrastructures. Rather than reducing a complex economic issue to political rhetoric, we owe it to the Fijian people to engage in honest, evidence-based discussions that foster confidence in our nation's economic future.

Ultimately, what matters is not simply the debt level, but how it is managed, whether it remains sustainable, and whether it delivers lasting benefits to improve the livelihoods of our people. Fiscal responsibility is a shared national responsibility that must always arise above short-term political consideration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Risk Management has continued to strengthen the delivery of development programmes across Fiji, with project implementation increasing steadily over the past four financial years. From 2022 to 2023 to 2025 to 2026, the Ministry successfully implemented a total of 1,239 projects nationwide, increasing annual project delivery from 150 projects in 2022 to 2023 to 380 in 2025 and 2026. These projects have directly improved access to essential infrastructure like housing, water, livelihood and disaster and resilience of rural and maritime communities throughout the country.

The Ministry's achievements by programme from 2023 to 2026 includes:

- Rural Housing assistance: 385 projects;
- Community access roads, footpaths and footbridges: 223 projects;
- Self-help programme: 192 projects;
- High-risk Water and Sanitation: 124 projects;
- Sea-faring entrepreneurship assistance: 113 projects in two years;
- Rural outer island development programme: 87 projects in two years
- Evacuation centres: 73 open projects upon commission in the last two years;
- Improvement to Government quarters: 19
- Risk-informed development: 11 projects; and
- Disaster Risk Reduction: 11 Projects.

The list goes on and I can recite this until midnight on what this Government has achieved in the last two years.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Go ahead, tell them!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, these statistics highlight the Government's continued investment in improving the quality of life of our rural and maritime communities. Through these programmes, we have delivered safer homes, improved road access, reliable water sanitation systems, strengthened disaster preparedness, enhanced livelihoods and better Government infrastructure across all four divisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Risk Management has been allocated $35.4 million in this 2026 – 2027 National Budget, to continue delivering programmes that directly improve the quality of life of our people who live outside urban centres. While this represents a reduction in the allocation from the previous financial year, the allocation shows Government's broader commitment to fiscal discipline while maintaining investment in programmes that produce tangible outcomes for rural and maritime communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this budget is not about spending more, it is rather about spending smarter and prioritising programmes that produce measurable improvement in livelihoods, resilience and economic opportunity. Every dollar invested into my ministry will be directed towards initiatives that strengthen our rural and maritime communities, stimulate rural economies and improve service delivery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the Government for this continued commitment, for the rural outer island development programme and rural housing assistance. With each receiving an allocation of $3 million in this 2026- 2027 budget, these two flagship programmes remain the cornerstone of the Ministry's work to transform the lives of people living in rural and maritime and outer island communities. This demonstrates Government's unwavering support to ensure the development is not confined to the urban centres, however, it reaches every village, settlement, island, creating opportunity where all people live and work.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the ROI programme continues to complement and strengthen agriculture, fisheries and forestry through value-adding initiatives and processing facilities, cold storage, infrastructure and improved market access, enabling rural and maritime communities to generate sustainable livelihoods more meaningfully in the national economy. Likewise, the continued investment in the rural housing assistance programme will allow more deserving families to access safer, resilient and engineered homes that can better withstand natural disasters. With more than 8000 applications received over the past three years, these continued allocations recognise significant demand that still exists and reinforce that every Fijian family has the opportunity to live in dignity and security.

I also warmly welcome the significant increase in funding for construction and retrofitting of evacuation centres which has been increased by one million dollars. As the minister responsible for Disaster Risk and Management, I know firsthand, that investing in resilient infrastructure helps to protect lives and communities. Climate-induced disasters are becoming more frequent and intense, and communities must have access to evacuation facilities that are safe, accessible and capable of meeting the minimum standards during emergencies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I further commend the increased allocation of $3 million for the community access road, footpaths and footbridges. Reliable infrastructure remains fundamental in rural and maritime communities because it connects people to school, health facilities, markets and essential Government services. For many rural families, a properly constructed road or footbridge is a way to economic opportunity, improved education, better healthcare, and greater social cohesion.

Complementing this investment is the continued funding for the Sawanikula to Tubarua Road Project, which will advance the second phase of this transformational initiative in the remote district of Waimanu in the interior of Naitasiri. Once completed, this road will improve connectivity for several remote villages, reduce travel hardship, facilitate agricultural production, and market access, and improve access to education and health services, such investments reaffirm Government’s commitment to ensuring that no community remains isolated because of geography.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the increase of funding in the Self-Help Project Programme, which will now receive $1.3 million. This project continues to empower communities, enable them to identify and implement projects directly on their own priorities, whether through community infrastructure, income generating initiative, disaster preparedness projects, or social development activities, and promotes community ownership, self-reliance, and sustainable local development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also commend the Government for its continued investment in the upgrade and advancement of Government staff quarters, with now a $1.6 million allocation, which will help in the refurbishment of staff quarters at our Vunisea Government Station in Kadavu and a further $1.9 million for the upgrading of existing quarters across the Central and Western Divisions. These allocations will enable the Ministry to complete maintenance and repair works of 33 staff quarters in Vunisea and 36 quarters in the Central and Western Divisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many of our officers who are stationed in remote and maritime locations, often separated from their family and working under challenging conditions, to ensure essential Government services reach every Fijian providing them with safe and modern and well-maintained accommodation, creates a conducive and professional living environment that enhances staff morale, promotes productivity and supports the retention of experienced officers in those remote areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Risk Management, this Budget provides the confidence and the resources to continue delivering practical outcomes for our people, whether through safer homes, improved roads and foot crossing, reliable water supply and strengthened disaster preparedness, or enhanced support for rural livelihoods, every investment contributes to our shared vision of creating sustainable and resilient rural maritime communities. These are investments that will continue to deliver dividends for generations of Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just before I take my seat, this Budget reflects responsible leadership during the period when prudence, discipline and long-term planning are more important than ever. We demonstrate that this Coalition Government remains committed to putting the interests of the people first, while laying strong foundations for sustainable economic growth and national resilience. I therefore commend the honourable Minister for Finance for presenting a responsible, forward-looking budget, and I fully support the 2026-2027 National Budget.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, watching live via *Facebook* and *Walesi.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today in strong support of the 2026-2027 National Budget. This is a responsible and forward-looking budget, one that reflects the realities before our nation, while also setting a clear direction for stability, recovery and long-term growth. It is a budget that understands the pressure of our people, the demand of our economy, and the duty of our Government is to act with courage, discipline and compassion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this budget is about our land and our people. *Na noda Vanua kei na tamata*. [Our land and our people]. It is about whether ordinary Fijian can put food on the table, whether families can afford transport and electricity, whether our children can access quality education, and whether our communities can see real development beyond words and promises, the budget recognised that governance must be measured not by rhetoric's but by result.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in times like this, leadership demands more than optimism. It demands a political will to make difficult choice to borrow responsibly when necessary and direct those resources into areas that build national strength. If borrowing is tied to infrastructure, health, education, and productive sectors, then it becomes an instrument of progress rather than a burden on the future. As we say, *na vakatulewa dodonu e kauta mai na bula vinaka.* Wise decisions bring a better life.

Cost of living support: One of the greatest concerns facing ordinary Fijians today is the cost of living. This Government has listened, that is why this Budget deliver more than $500 million in tax and duty reduction on essential household goods including potatoes, iron, garlic, peas, and cooking oil. It continues electricity and water subsidies by household earnings below $30,000 while maintaining $20 million bus fare subsidy to reduce transport costs for thousands of workers, students, and families. These are not empty promises.

These are practical messages that will put money back into the pocket of hardworking Fijians. This is a Government that understands that when families can afford food, transport, utilities, our economy becomes stronger because our people become stronger. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it also continue monitoring to ensure these duty reductions are passed on directly to consumers. Every dollar of relief announced by the Government must become a dollar saved by our people.

Infrastructure and National Development: Mr. Speaker, Sir, I strongly support the protection of $876 million in capital expenditure within the affordability of two billion infrastructure programmes. This includes hospitals, wastewater systems, bridges, and renewable energy projects.

This is the kind of investment that moves the nation forward. Infrastructure is not only spending, but also a nation building. Every bridge repaired, every hospital upgraded, every energy project delivered, and every energy system improved strengthen the foundation of national progress.

Na veivakatorocaketaki vinaka ka taucoko e dau taura na gauna. Real development takes time and care. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also support the shift towards more capital investment because the growing economy must create assets, jobs, and productivity, not just recruitment spending. This budget shows that Government understand the need to build, not merely to maintain.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, education remains a ladder in which our children rise. The allocation for teacher training and rural schools are important, and I support them. But we must continue to deepen investment in vocational education, STEM learning, and scholarships so that our young people are prepared for the modern economy.

Education is the currency of life. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in health, I welcome funding for hospital upgrades and medicine supply chains. A hospital without medicine is not delivering proper care, and I urge continued focus on staffing rural access and prevention.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in agriculture support for food security and climate smart farming is timely, and I encourage greater diversification, agro-processing, and value-added production. *Na qele e ka bula.* The land is life. For tourism, SMEs, I support the emphasis on recovery and innovation small businesses are the backbones of our communities, and they need access to credit-training markets and fair opportunity to growth.

Youth and opportunity: Our young people, are not merely the future, they are the present. Entrepreneurship, vocational skills, enterprise support and job creation must remain central to our national agenda. A budget that invests in youth is a budget that invests in stability, productivity and hope. Our youth must be given their time now.

On democracy and trust, Mr. Speaker, I also noted the allocation of $23.2 million for election preparation, $18.2 million for election day and $20 million for national referendum. This allocation reminds us that democracy has a cost, but it is a necessary one. Democratic nations must invest in transparency, trust and credible process. Every dollar spent in this area must be protected with integrity, public confidence and accountability. Fiscal responsibility and democratic responsibility must work together.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, the Budget is a clear statement of the value of this Government. It protects families, it supports workers, it invests in infrastructure, it strengthens healthcare and education, it creates opportunities for businesses, and it prepares young people for the future. Most importantly, it puts the interests of ordinary Fijian ahead of politics.

Yes, challenges remain. No responsible government will claim otherwise but leadership is measured not by avoiding challenges, it is measured by confronting them with courage, compassion and responsible decision making. This Budget provides that leadership is practical, it is disciplined and compassionate and, above all, it is a Budget that continues rebuilding Fiji for every citizen.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the leadership of the honourable Prime Minister, Fiji continues moving forward with confidence, stability and hope. A budget is more than revenue and expenditure - it is a reflection of our nation's priorities and our commitment to every Fijian. *Na noda vanua, na* *kena tamata* – our land, our people deserve nothing less. For these reasons, I firmly commend this Budget to the House and give it my full support.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, I rise in support of the 2026-2027 National Budget. The Budget demonstrates responsible fiscal management while investing confidently in Fiji's future.

When this Government assumed Office, it inherited not only economic challenges, but also years of accumulated neglect across many areas of Government.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Hear, hear!

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- That neglect was evident not only in our hospitals, health centres, government quarters and public infrastructure here at home, but also in Fiji's diplomatic properties overseas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have personally inspected many of these properties in Canberra, Wellington, London and Brussels. Visionary leaders of the earlier generation secured diplomatic properties in prestigious locations for the benefit of future generations of Fijians. Sadly, many were allowed to deteriorate to unacceptable standards. Deferred maintenance is never free. The bill simply becomes much larger with time. Just as this Government has shown the political will to restore our hospitals, government quarters and public facilities at home, we have now begun restoring Fiji's chancery and official residences abroad. These are strategic national assets, and we have a responsibility to preserve them.

The Opposition often speaks about the size of the national debt but seldom acknowledges why some of today's expenditure has become necessary. Had these assets been properly maintained during their years in office, taxpayers would not now be carrying the much greater cost of restoring them. At the same time, Fiji's improving debt-to-GDP ratio tells a more accurate story about the direction of our public finances.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget has been prepared at a time of continuing global uncertainty. Geopolitical tensions, disruptions in international trade, and the growing impacts of climate change continue to challenge economies everywhere, yet Fiji has remained resilient. I congratulate the honourable Minister for Finance, Commerce, Business Development for presenting a budget that balances fiscal responsibility with investment in Fiji's future.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade has an important role in delivering that future. Foreign policy is not an abstract exercise. Every market will be open to all the investors we try to attract. Every development partnership is secure in every region. The system will strengthen our sovereignty, security, and our prosperity.

In an increasingly uncertain world, Fiji cannot afford to be a passive observer. We must engage with confidence, protect our national interests, and ensure that our diplomacy delivers practical benefits for every Fijian. It is this understanding, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that I now turn to the work of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget supports the next phase of our mission, given by the National Development Plan 2025-2029, providing continuity of the work that has been undertaken under current fiscal year. The focus of the Minister is aligned with the theme of the budget being a current budget for a sustainable future.

This is not an easy Budget. The economic round is undulating. Opportunities are unequal, however, the budget aspires to ensure that this Government continues to invest in our people, strengthen essential public services, and lay the foundations for long-term economic resilience. It has been prepared against a backdrop of continual global uncertainty.

Globally, economies are grappling with slow growth, persistent inflationary pressures, geo-political tensions, supply chain disruptions, and increasingly climate and laser disasters. Small Island Developing States (SIDs) such as Fiji continue to face these challenges disproportionately. Yet, despite these global winds, Fiji has remained resilient. Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade is the principal agency responsible for advancing Fiji's international diplomatic interests.

The Ministry is a steward of Fiji's international partnerships, advocates for a regional voice, and a custodian of diplomacy that reflects Fiji's culture, values, and vision for the future. Guided by the three pillars of sovereignty, security, and prosperity in Fiji's foreign policy white paper, the Ministry advances Fiji's position in the world by serving our people with integrity, professionalism, and purpose. Our foreign policy will continue to be guided by our national interests, respect for international law, constructive engagement with all partners, and our enduring commitment to peace, regional cooperation, and sustainable development. That balanced approach has served Fiji well and will continue to guide our engagement within the international community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome the allocation of $56.6 million to advance Fiji's Foreign Policy priorities and maintain our existing international presence through our 14 Diplomatic Missions and four Trade Commissions abroad and the Roving Ambassadors Division based at Headquarters. The overall allocation now includes external trade provisions, too, as a strategic investment in Fiji's sovereignty, economy, and global voice.

The Ministry of Finance rightly highlighted that in today's global environment, it is important that Fiji remains connected to key partners and markets around the world. Our overseas Missions play an important role in promoting trade, attracting investment, supporting tourism, creating great employment opportunities, and looking after the interests of Fijians abroad. This allocation provides support for the continued expansion of Fiji's diplomatic footprint with an operational allocation for our Mission in Jerusalem and for the reopening of Fiji's Diplomatic Mission in Brussels.

A total budget of $6.3 billion will be allocated for both Missions. These strategic investments will strengthen Fiji's global presence and advance our national interests. While Brussels serves as a gateway to Europe and the European Union, a key partner in trade, sustainable development, and multilateral cooperation, our mission in Jerusalem, on the other hand, strengthens historical bonds, expands diplomatic and technical horizons in a key geo-political region.

Together, these Missions will deepen Fiji's engagement with key partners and markets, unlock new economic opportunities for trade and investment, and ensure that Fiji continues to have strong voice in regional and international affairs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the multilateral landscape continues to evolve with new global developments, creating challenges for developing economies, the politics of the North and the South, and the development challenges impacting Small Island Developing States (SIDS) as a result.

There are four key issues for Fiji:

(1) ensuring Fiji's support for multilateralism, Fiji is fully committed to multilateralism, a rules-based global order, and cooperating with the UN on key global issues;
(2) working towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals;
(3) utilising multilateralism to address threats to peace and security, in alignment with the Ocean of Peace Declaration; and
(4) understanding increasing geo-political risks in space, the sea, and on land.

We are repositioning Fiji, whose voice must be heard clearly in the world's decision-making corridors. Through this strategic footprint, we ensure that when global decisions are made about global agendas such as trade, security and climate, Fiji is not merely waiting for the aftermath, but what we would like to ensure, that we are actively at the table protecting our national interests.

The re-establishment of the Brussels Mission, originally established in 1973, reverses the temporary closure forced by post-COVID-19 austerity measures in 2021. While our Permanent Mission in Geneva has worked tirelessly to cover European affairs in the interim, this arrangement has proven operationally inefficient.

The extreme workload situation in Geneva, significant time zone constraints and the sheer structural complexity of European Union institutions necessitate dedicated, on-the-ground presence in the capital of Europe. By re-establishing a resident footprint in Brussels, Fiji returns directly to the table where critical global decisions on trade, climate diplomacy and maritime security are negotiated. The Embassy will actively safeguard our national interests and strengthen vital economic ties with the European Union (EU) and the Organisation of African, Caribbean Pacific States, while providing direct consular support to our growing diaspora in the region.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our overseas missions are the face of Fiji. Every visa that we facilitate, every development partnership secured and every citizen assisted, contributes directly to our national development. Over the past years, the Ministry has worked tirelessly on reviewing and expanding Fiji's global footprint in terms of opening up new missions and re-opening of missions that have been closed due to COVID-19 pandemic.

The budget also includes initiatives on modernising our overseas infrastructure, because our Diplomats deserve to be equipped and empowered to serve to the best of their ability. I call on our Diplomats to bring back the return on investment that Fiji expects of them, for the benefit of its people. There are refurbishment works planned for Fiji Missions in London, Wellington, Canberra and Brussels, and capital purchases in Beijing, Jakarta, New Delhi, Jerusalem and Auckland Consular Offices. This budget recognises that fiscal discipline and strategic investment must go hand in hand.

Like all Ministries, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade will operate within tighter expenditure limits, while ensuring that our core mandate of protecting Fiji's national interests abroad is not compromised. Allocation of tasks and resources with the Service are critical to mission accomplishments. To navigate with purpose, the Ministry is guided by the realities facing our people, their aspirations and obstacles we must overcome. We are moving with strategy, with intention and with conviction.

At the very outset, I acknowledge with profound gratitude the reinforcements of our development partners, who support is indispensable to work we do and the path we are now taking. Foreign policy is no longer confines to diplomacy alone. Every overseas Mission contributes directly to economic growth, through trade promotion, investment attraction, tourism, labour mobility, climate advocacy, development partnerships and consular assistance for Fijians overseas.

This Budget reflects our commitment to strengthening Fiji's international presence and improving services delivered through our Overseas Missions. As we manage resources prudently, we will continue reviewing our operations to ensure that every dollar delivers measurable outcomes for the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry believes in the strength of Pacific Solidarity, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, the Custodian and Defender of the Ocean of Peace, and other multilateral agencies such as the Pacific Community or SPC and the Melanesian Spearhead Group, that promote peace and development in the region.

As a forward-looking approach, the Ministry is proactive in identifying leadership potential within Fiji to serve the region and multilateral agencies. For this financial year, we will continue to work on two key fronts:

(1) Regional Leadership and the Pacific as the Ocean of Peace
We live in a time of profound economic volatility and geopolitical tension. For a SIDS like Fiji, we know that these are not abstract ideas, they are not abstract concepts. They are realities that we live and that test our resilience dailyand core to Fiji's foreign policy is the region in which we exist.

Strengthening integration, peace and solidarity within the Pacific is inextricably linked to Fiji's long-term aspirations for security and prosperity. This is why we have set out to place the Pacific front and centre of our foreign policy with a Pacific Family First approach.

(2) Alignment of our Foreign Policy to support the Implementation of the Fiji National Development Plan
Global disruptions continue to reshape economic and demographic patterns, including internal migration and urbanisation, requiring a forward-looking and coordinated national response. As we navigate these complex geo-strategic dynamics, our North Star remains the Ocean of Peace. This vision, championed by the honourable Prime Minister, is now a formal digital cornerstone following its endorsement at the 54th Pacific Island Forum Leaders' Summit in 2025.

This Ministry will continue aligning its work with the National Development Plan by advancing international partnerships that support and strengthen energy, security, economic resilience, climate action, security cooperation and regional integration. In doing so, we will prioritise practical diplomacy that delivers potential outcomes for national development. Consistent with the Foreign Policy White Paper, our engagement will remain anchored in sovereignty, security and prosperity, including through the continuous strengthening of Fiji's diplomatic footprint.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I turn to the year ahead, let me briefly reflect on progress we have made on external trade. The 2025-2026 financial year was one of the most consequential in recent memory for Fiji's trade diplomacy. Under the European Union (EU) Pacific Interim Economic Partnership Agreement (IEPA), the European Commission activated the global sourcing derogation in July 2025, opening preferential access for our processed fisheries products and giving our exporters a genuine competitive edge.

We launched the Fiji Trade Information Portal with world-class support and commenced implementation of the WTO Fisheries Subsidies Agreement following its entry into force in September 2025.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our regional and multilateral engagements also reached new heights this year. In January 2026, Fiji co-chaired and hosted the 11th EU-Pacific IEPA Trade Committee meeting in Suva, bringing together IEPA parties to advance discussions on agricultural value chains, geographical indications, regional carbon development strategies, and preparations for the WTO's 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14).

In March 2026, I led Fiji's delegations to MC14 in Yaoundé, Cameroon, joining Ministers from 165 World Trade Organization (WTO) countries to advance our priorities on fisheries subsidies disciplines and recognition of the special circumstances of small island developing States.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this august House approved Fiji's accession to the Advisory Centrum WTO Law, a significant step that will strengthen Fiji's capacity to protect and advance its trade interests through access to specialised legal advice, technical support, and capacity building on international trade law. On the bilateral front, we secured a reduction in United States reciprocal tariffs on Fijian exports from 32 percent to 10 percent for agricultural commodities.

In November 2025, Fiji signed the Enhanced Economic Partnership Agreement with China. This year for the first time, Fiji was invited as a special guest at Australia's 6th Ministerial Council on Trade and Investment. This provided an unprecedented platform to present Fiji's economic transformation agenda directly to Australian Commonwealth States and Territory Leaders. These were not isolated wins. They were the products of sustained, disciplined trade diplomacy and they have positioned Fiji to enter 2026-2027 from a position of strength rather than catch-up. It is on this foundation that we now build.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our first priority is to operationalise the Fiji Trade Policy Framework, which will chart the course for trade and investment for the next decade. Following extensive nationwide consultations across the Central, Western, and Northern Divisions in 2025, the Ministry is finalising the draft framework for Cabinet's endorsement with a formal launch targeted for late 2026. This Budget allocates $56,250 to complete this work ensuring that Fiji moves from the current policy to one that reflects today's trading realities and tomorrow's opportunities.

We also press ahead on multiple fronts of negotiation, charting the way forward for Fiji's trade and economic development. An allocation of $250,000 for trade negotiations and meetings, together with the ministerial trade delegation budget of $80,000, will support our continued engagement in bilateral and multilateral negotiations, securing new economic partnerships, and strengthening existing ones in the markets that matter most to Fiji.

We will build on the gains already secured and continue our work under the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework of Prosperity (IPEF), for which $78,750 has been allocated to implement a supply chain, clean economy, and fair economy pillars. Our overseas Trade Commission, Mr. Speaker Sir, remains the commercial front line of our diplomacy. This Budget allocates $1.49 million to our Trade Commission in North America, $1.7 million to our Trade Commission in China, $1.53 million to our Consulate General and Trade Commission in Australia, and a further $490 000 for the New Zealand Trade and Export Office, alongside $11,250 for our Trade Facilitation Programme. These investments will expand market access for Fijian-made and Fijian-grown products, attract investment and ensure exporters have a dedicated person in the markets that matter the most.

Domestically, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will continue modernising the way Fiji trades with the world, building on the successful launch of the Fiji Trade Information Portal. Taken together, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, these are the building blocks of our trade agenda for 2026. I would like to thank the honourable Minister for Finance, Commerce, Business Development, honourable Esrom Immanuel for looking and sustainable budget preparation once again for the 2026-2027 fiscal year.

A new financial year, Sir, will come with its own challenges and opportunities, clear leadership, national unity, and steadfast commitment to our values, Fiji will continue to stand tall, not only as a proud Pacific nation, but as a respected voice in the global community.

Together, we will continue building affordable services that are responsive, innovative, and result orientated. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the 2026-2027 Budget to this august House.

HON. I. TUIWAILEVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, the Cabinet Ministers, my fellow Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, members of media, and my fellow Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, with your permission, I wish to deliver my contribution to the 2026-2027 National Budget in a mix of I'taukei language and English so that my remarks are clearly and easily followed.

Turaga na Speaker*, au tucake meu vakaraitaka ni'u tokona na i tuvatuva vakailavo ni noda matanitu ena yabaki vakailavo ni 2026-2027 ka bosei tiko ena loma ni Vale ni Bose Lawa nikua.*

E cavuti na vakavinavinaka vua na Turaga na Prime Minister *kei na* Minister *ni veika vakailavo, Lewe ni Bose Lawa kei na nodrai vukevuke, Liuliu ni To ni Veisaqa, kei na Lewe ni Bose Lawa. Au sa cavuta talega na vakavinavinaka levu vua na Turaga na Minister ni Veika Vakailavo kei na Turaga na Vunivola Tudei ena kena qaravi ka vakarautaki na noda I tuvatuva vakailavo e na yabaki vakailavo oqo, ka vakarau meda sa vavaca yani.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the theme of this Budget is, "A Responsible Budget for the Sustainable Future" - *"Na i tuvatuva vakailavo ka nanumi kina na noda veigauna mai muri.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget has been prepared at a time when Government must manage significant national pressures, protect essential public services and continue investing into Fiji's future. It also requires Ministries to operate more efficiently, with a 10 percent reduction in operational expenditures across Government.

The honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs will address the wider allocation of the Ministry. I will, therefore, focus my remarks on the equally important foundation of *iTaukei* development, our *iTaukei* language, culture, heritage, traditional knowledge and artistic expression.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, sustainable development is not measured by the roads we build, the services we provide, or income we generate - it is measured on whether our children know who they are, whether they can speak and understand their language, whether the knowledge of our elders is passed on and whether our communities remain connected to the values and institutions that have sustained them through generations.

Turaga na Speaker*, na Tabana ni Vosa kei na i Tovo Vakaviti e dua na Tabana ka taqomaka, maroroya, ka cibitaka na noda vosa kei na i tovo vakaiTaukei e na Tabacakacaka ni Veik Vakaitaukei. E rauta ni* $1.44 million *na i wasewase vakailavo e wasei vua na Tabani ni Vosa kei na i Tovo vaka-Viti e na yabaki vakai lavo ni 2026 kei na 2027. Ni vakatauvatani kei na yabaki vakailavo sa oti - 2025 kei na 2026, e tubu na i okaoka vakailavo ena $315,200, ka rauta tiko ni 28 na pasede. Na tubu oqo e la'ki vukea vakavinaka na veiqaravi ena loma ni Tabana ni iTaukei kei na i okaoka e rauta ni $191,030 e na yabaki 2025 kei na 2026, ka tubu me rauta e $475,200 ena yabaki vakailavo vou.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this demonstrates that even with the budget requiring expenditure restraint, Government recognises that cultural preservation cannot continue to be postponed. Funding must, therefore, be translated in a measurable way to communities, properly preserve records, accessible resources and stronger transmission of knowledge to the next generation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, language is the centre of cultural identity. It is also through language that our children learn the meaning of relationship within a family, namely, the *mataqali*, *yavusa* and the *vanua*. It is through language that they understand protocol, traditional leadership, moral history, customary responsibility, and the values that guide communal life.

Turaga na Sipika, e rauta ni $900,000 a vakagolei ki na okaoka vakailavo me baleta na rai lesuvi ni Vola Vosa vaka-Viti se na Monolingual Dictionary. *Oqo e dua na i tavi bibi ni Tabana oqo e na kena tomani tiko na sasaga ni kena biu vata na i vola oqo se* dictionary, *me vaka na draki ni bula eda sa donumaka kei na veisau e kauta mai na vuravura me baleta na kena vakabibitaki na vosa.*

This dictionary must extend beyond the collection of individual words. This also records specialised terms relating to customary institutions, traditional skills, plants, fisheries, weather, food, ceremonies and relationships that are related to our totem and traditional lunar calendar or *Vula Vaka-Viti*. Therefore, it is my honour to inform this august House that a total of 100 words has been meticulously researched and submitted for rigorous editorial committee review, that will formally refer to the National Language Committee for their endorsement. A total of 100 words for the next financial year, which will be added to the second edition of Monolingual Dictionary known as "*iVolavosa Vakaviti".*

Turaga na Speaker*, e rauta ni $30,000 nai okaoka vakailavo ni kena vakananumi na "Siga ni Vosa ni Vanua" ka dau vakayacori ena vei ka 21 ni siga ni Veverueri ena veiyabaki kei na $100,000 e vagolei ena kena qaravi me baleta na "Duqele ni vosa ni Vanua".*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the outcome from 2025-2026 financial year demonstrate that our language activities are not merely ceremonial but are vital instruments of cultural resilience, educational equity, and national unity. The proposed activities for 2026-2027 are designed to deepen this impact, leveraging our digital momentum while expanding physical outreach to ensure that no indigenous Fijian and Rotuman is left behind in the journey to preserve our unique voices. We respectfully request Parliament's continued support and appropriation and realised these objectives.

Language preservation cannot be achieved by Government alone. The language must continue to be spoken in our homes. Parents and grandparents must be encouraged to speak with children in the language and to explain the meaning behind the words, expressions and forms of respect that they use.

Turaga na Speaker*, e rauta e $86,462 nai okaoka vakailavo me baleta na kena mapetaki na noda vosa, qo e porokaramu vou e tiko ena yabaki vakailavo qo.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is an important investment because the *iTaukei* language is not uniform throughout Fiji. Our regional dialects preserve distinctive histories, identities and ways of understanding the world. Linguistic mapping identifies areas where dialects remain strong, where usage is declining and where urgent documentation is required.

It includes the recording of elders and fluent speakers, pronunciation, oral traditions, specialist vocabulary and differences in meaning and usage among communities. Digital archiving is equally important. Audio recordings, video recordings, manuscripts, photographs and field notes will be preserved in formats that remain secure and accessible as technology changes. Digital preservation must be accompanied by appropriate safeguards. Mr. Speaker, Sir, digital preservation will protect language and cultural knowledge, for future benefits of custodians.

Turaga na Speaker*, e $47,250 nai okaoka ni veivakadeitaki ni tukutuku ena yabaki vakailavo 2026-2027 me qaravi kina e tolu na tikina e na Yasana o Naitaisiri ena walu na koro kei na rua na tikina ena Yasana o Bua ena 14 na koro.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, cultural mapping has enabled the collection of information about oral histories, traditional practices, significant places, customary knowledge and cultural expressions throughout *iTaukei* communities. However, collecting information is only the first stage. The information must be returned to the relevant community for authentication. This programme must be implemented with urgency, but it must not sacrifice accuracy. It must record different accounts where legitimate differences exist and avoid presenting disputed information as settled fact. The process is also recognised that some knowledge is not made generally available.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to inform the House that cultural data authentication has been completed for 86 villages across 16 districts in Naitasiri Province during the 2025-2026 financial year. For the 2026-2027 financial year, works are scheduled for three districts in Naitasiri Province consisting of eight villages and two districts in Bua Province, comprising of 14 villages, with the outstanding authentication works expected to be finalised by the end of the third quarter of 2027, completing a total of 108 villages.

Turaga na Speaker*, e rauta ni $22,500 e vagolei ena kena maroroi na itukutuku ni Tabana ni Vosa kei nai Tovo Vakaviti.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this includes interviews, recordings, manuscripts, photographs, genealogical information, cultural surveys, and documentation of traditional practices. To ensure the preservation and accessibility of these invaluable records - which hold the voices of elders and knowledge that may no longer be widely practiced, and whose worth transcends the physical storage media – the allocated funding will support proper cataloguing, conservation, digitisation, secure storage, and disaster preparedness, all underpinned by a clear backup and recovery system, with the digitized collection ultimately made available through a cloud-based e-library.

Fiji is exposed to cyclones, flooding, fire, humidity, and other risks that can damage physical and electronic records. Cultural preservation must therefore be included in the institutional disaster preparedness.

Turaga na Speaker*, rauta e $45,000 e vagolei kina voli ni iyaya me baleta na sova ni itukutuku*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the development of a cultural database must be closely connected to the protection of traditional knowledge and expressions of culture. Traditional knowledge does not always fit comfortably within ordinary intellectual property laws. It may be collectively held rather than owned by one identifiable individual. It may have been transmitted orally over many generations. It may belong to a particular community and be connected to its identity, history and spiritual responsibilities.

Traditional designs, stories, performance, symbols and knowledge can be reproduced or commercially exploited without proper permission, attribution or benefits to the custodial community. A database may help document the existence and custodianship of cultural material, but documentation alone will not provide complete legal protection.

Turaga na Speaker*, ena vukudra nai Talai ni Kovana, au gadreva meu vakasavuya ena Boselawa ni sa cakacakataki tiko na lawa ni kena maroroi ne veika me baleti keda.*

I wish to inform the House that in 2025, we began the crucial process of data entry into the Traditional Knowledge and Expression of Culture (TKEC) Database. To ensure the accuracy and efficiency of this process, we initially piloted the input procedures using data from the provinces of Namosi and Serua. To-date, the Data Management Project team has successfully lodged 1,596 authenticated records for Namosi Province and 1,164 records for Serua Province. Furthermore, data entry for Lomaiviti Province has commenced this year (2026), marking a significant milestone in the progression of this vital initiative.

As of 2026, the Institute has successfully digitised the cultural mapping data of 10 provinces, with the remaining four provinces of Kadavu, Lau, Nadroga/Navosa and Ba targeted for completion by 2030. Currently, approximately 3,873 audio recordings from these 4 provinces await digitisation. Acquiring this advanced equipment will significantly expedite the processing of raw cultural mapping data, ensuring its secure preservation across both provincial backup hard drives, and the ITC storage system.

Turaga na Speaker*, e $50,000.00 e vagolei ena porokaramu ni vevakabulabulataki, ka vakabulabulataki kina na veika baleti keda kei na vuku iTaukei.Nai tuvatuva oqo e vakatabakidua ena kena vaqaqacotaki tale na veitiki ni nodai tovo era sa yali tiko yani vakamalua. Ena yabaki vakailavo oqo, ena qaravi kina e tolu na vuli ni veivakabulabulataki, oqo e oka kina na kena vakabulabulataki na samu masi ena koro ko Nabukadra ena yasana vakaturaga o Ra, na meke ni yaqona kei na tuli kuro ena tikina o Yawe, ena yasana o Kadavu kei na vakabulabulataki ni vuku iTaukei ena tikina o Matailobau ena yasana o Naitasiri.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the holders of this knowledge include traditional craftspeople, performers, composers, storytellers, builders, healers, fishers, farmers and other recognised specialists. The Government must support these knowledge holders to teach others while they are still able to do so. Revitalisation, therefore, involves structured transmission, not only demonstrations. Through cultural revitalisation workshops, knowledge on the brink of extinction is effectively transmitted across generations within the community. Attention should be directed towards the knowledge that is held exclusively by a limited number of elderly custodians or Living Human Treasures – referred to locally as “Radau” - or that is concentrated within communities currently facing relocation, demographic decline, or other significant pressures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to inform the House that we have successfully conducted 40 revitalisation workshops across all 14 Provinces. These workshops cover a broad spectrum of iTaukei traditional practices, including:

- Oral traditions;
- Social practices and traditional ceremonies;
- Performing arts or traditional entertainment, such as *meke* (dances) and *vucu* (chants);
- Craftsmanship, encompassing *masi kuvui* (smoked bark cloth), traditional mat weaving, *sova ni magiti* (traditional food platter and baskets), et cetera.

For the current financial year 2025-2026, the team conducted specialised revitalisation workshops in:

- *Tali iri ni Cautata* or traditional fan weaving in Cautata Village, District of Bau, Tailevu Province;
- *Tara vale vaka Viti* or traditional *bure* building in Vanuaso Village, District of Vanuaso, Lomaiviti Province; and

- Pre-assessment exercise for *meke ni yaqona vakaturaga* or traditional ceremonies and *tuli kuro vaka Viti* or traditional pottery making in Naqalotu Village, District of Yawe, Kadavu Province.

Looking ahead to the next financial year (2026-2027), our plans include three more revitalisation workshops.

Turaga na Speaker*, e $100,000 e vagolei ena veivakararamataki ni itovo kei na solevu ni iTaukei. Nai tuvatuva oqo e vakatabakidua sara ga ena kena dau qaravi na veivakararamataki ena noda delaniyavu vakaturaga ena nodra tuberi na kawabula kei Viti ena siga ni mataka.*

Turaga na Speaker*, e $30,000 e vagolei ena kena vakananumi na siga ni taukei ni vanua e vuravura ka dau vakayacori ena ika ciwa ni siga ni vula ko Okosita. Na siga oqo e dau vakananuma kina o vuravura na nodra bula nai taukei dina vanua ena veivanua duidui e vuravura.*

Mr. Speaker, cultural preservation and economic development are not treated as opposing objectives. Our cultural custodians are to be able to earn a fair livelihood from their skills while maintaining authenticity and respecting the rights of their communities. The Budget introduces a new tax incentive for companies with at least 30 percent of *iTaukei* shareholding investing in eco-tourism, cultural tourism and arts-related businesses. Qualifying investments between $5 million and $10 million will receive a seven-year tax holiday, while investments above $10 million will receive 13-year tax holiday.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an allocation in the Budget is not by itself, an achievement. The test will be whether the funding produces tangible and lasting results. The Ministry and TILC must ensure timely implementation. The Institute's work must be reported not only through expenditure figures, but through substantive outcomes. The reduction in general operational expenditure means that resources must be concentrated on frontline and community-based activities. We should reduce expenditure on workshops or events that end without follow-up action.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the Permanent Secretary for iTaukei Affairs and the officers of the Ministry, particularly, the Director and staff of the iTaukei Institute of Language and Culture who undertake the detailed work of research, documentation, authentication, preservation and community engagement.

I acknowledge the Great Council of Chiefs, provincial councils, *bose vanua,* traditional leaders and community representatives who guide and support cultural work. I acknowledge our elders, Radau language specialists, craftspeople, artists, performers, storytellers and all those who hold and transmit traditional knowledge. Government institutions can provide funding, research and co-ordination, but culture remains alive because people continue to speak the language, practise the knowledge, and teach it to others.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our responsibility is to help create the conditions in which that inheritance remains living, protected, and meaningful. With responsible implementation, strong community participation, and proper accountability, this Budget can help ensure that *iTaukei* language, culture, heritage and arts can remain a source of strength for our people and our nation.

Turaga na Speaker*, meu tinia, au gadreva meu vakaraitaka na noqu tokona nai Tuvatuva Vakailavo ni yabaki Vakailavo 2026-2027, ka duavata kei na kena lawa vakaturi ni Bose Lawa.Vakalougatataka na vanua kei na kena kawa bula na Kalou bula.*

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, members of the media and fellow Fijians, I rise today in support of the 2026-2027 National Budget presented under the theme "*A Responsible Budget for Sustainable Future*." This is not a budget of excess, not one of political convenience, it is a budget of responsibility grounded in the reality before us, a global fuel crisis, rising cost of Government's operations, pressure on public revenue and our shared duty to protect the long-term stability of this nation. If you are asking why use of the term "responsible", this Budget has been crafted as a responsible one for all those reasons. The budget is a call to sharpen our focus, to deliver a better value, and to continue to protect our people.

I acknowledge the honourable Prime Minister for his steady leadership during this period of global uncertainty, the honourable Minister for Finance, Commerce and Business Development and the hardworking team of the Ministry of Finance for presenting a budget that is honest about the challenges we face, and disciplined in its response.

The Budget seeks to ask all Ministers to tighten expenditure and reduce operational cost. As the Minister responsible for Tourism and Civil Aviation, I accept that discipline fully. The global fuel crisis has affected every sector, every household, and every corner of our economy. When the country faces pressure, Government must respond as one. No ministry stands outside the national reality. But let me be clear, this Government has not stepped away from tourism and civil aviation. We have reduced where we must, protected where we should, and invested where it matters most.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, tourism remains one of Fiji's most important economic pillars, supporting employment, investment, foreign exchange earnings, small businesses, transport, agriculture, culture and the livelihoods of thousands of Fijian families. Aviation is a bridge that connects Fiji to the world.

In 2025, Fiji welcomed over one million visitors when air and cruise arrivals are counted together, a historic milestone for the sector. Tourism contributes around 40 percent of national GDP, directly and indirectly, showing why sustained investment in this sector that matters. For our tourism industry, aviation is not separate from tourism, it is central to it. The visitor arriving at Nadi International Airport, the family travelling to Taveuni, the community in Rotuma, Kadavu, Lau, Lomaiviti, relying on domestic air services; all are part of the same national story. That is why, even within a reduced budget environment, this Government continues to protect the core foundation of both sectors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government continues to prioritise investment in infrastructure. As the honourable Minister for Finance shared, we have 5,500 new rooms in the pipeline across major hotel developments valued at over $3 billion, but more hotels mean more supporting infrastructure.

Fiji Airports is investing $700 million over five years, covering airport modernisation, regional airport upgrades, digital technologies, renewable energy infrastructure, and aviation systems. The budget could be used at *iTaukei*-eco and cultural tourism incentive, providing a seven-year tax holiday for investors between $5 million and $10 million, and a 13-year holiday for investments above $10 million, subject to a minimum 30 percent *iTaukei* shareholding. This creates a new investment pathway for community-based and cultural tourism products, supporting greater *iTaukei* participation in the tourism sector. In addition, the extension of duty concessions on diesel for hotels and resorts for 2026 will provide near-term operating cost relief for tourism operators.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation has been allocated $75.8 million in the 2026-2027 National Budget compared to $93 million in the previous financial year. We have a reduced budget, but what matters is where the allocation has been directed. Government has protected the areas that matters most to the long-term strength of tourism and civil aviation sectors. This is not a retreat; it is a careful recalibration. It reflects the broader whole-of-Government effort to reduce operating costs, while still protecting core investments in Tourism Fiji, Na Vualiku, tourism MSMEs, domestic air services, civil aviation safety, and the Civil Aviation Master Plan. In other words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are doing more than managing a reduced budget. We are making sure that every dollar supports the priorities and keep our industry moving, our communities connected, and our national economy strong.

In this financial year, Tourism Fiji received an allocation of $45.82 million. In 2026-2027, we have been allocated $41.77 million which includes $33 million for marketing and $8.77 million as its operating grant. I acknowledge that reduction directly, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

For the past few months, we have seen the strength of the Fiji brand continue to reach our major visitor markets. Our destination remains recognised by our traditional markets, respected by industry partners, and loved by visitors who continue to choose Fiji. But the message from for this budget year is clear – every marketing dollar must now work harder. While recognising that other competing destinations are spending more in key markets, Tourism Fiji will be more strategic, more targeted, and more accountable in how we promote our country. We must deepen digital marketing, strengthen airline and hotel partnerships, and sharpen our focus, not only on visitor arrivals but on yield, value, and the impact tourism brings to our communities. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji cannot rely on duty alone. Our true strength is our people. It is our culture, it is the warmth, generosity, and authenticity or the Fijian experience. That is what sets us apart, and that is what we must continue to take to the world.

One of the most significant measures in this budget is the support provided to our national airline. Fiji Airways is a strategic national asset. It brings the majority of our visitors to our shores, supports jobs across the tourism industry, and anchors Fiji's position as the aviation hub of the South Pacific.

The fuel crisis has placed enormous pressure on the airline, and the Government has responded. The budget provides for a planned $200 million Government guarantee to support Fiji Airways, extends the loss carry-forward provision from 8 years to 15 years, and provides relief through the waiving of fees and charges for 12 months. When Fiji Airways is strong, the entire tourism economy is stronger – hotels, tour operators, restaurants, farmers, and families all benefit.

On that note, though there are dissenting voices, the temporary Tourism Services Tax must be understood in that broader context as part of the Government effort to protect the aviation backbone that supports the tourism industry. Many airlines have reduced capacity to survive the crisis, but for Fiji Airways, it has continued to maximise capacity. This has been welcomed by the majority of our partners and suppliers from our source markets and our tourism operators in Fiji. Quite simply, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when capacity is reduced, business activities also reduce. When capacity is maximised, business activities operate at maximum level, benefiting all.

Last week, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Radisson Blu Resort at Denarau celebrated the Hotel of the Year Award for 2025, recognising its outstanding performance and the best profit growth. This is for the Asia-Pacific region with some 67 resorts in contention in countries such a Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and others. Radisson Blu Resort became number one out of the constellation of Raddison Hotels in the Asia-Pacific. For all of these to happen, we need capacity at maximum level and Fiji salutes Fiji Airways for maintaining capacity at maximum level.

The Na Vualiku Tourism Development Programme remains one of the most important long-term investments in the Fiji tourism feature. This year, $20 million has been allocated. Context matters, however, Na Vualiku is a multi-year World Bank-supported programme, judged not by one year's allocation, but by its long-term purpose: to unlock the tourism potential of Vanua Levu and Taveuni and to ensure that development reaches beyond the traditional tourism belt. The programme supports enabling infrastructure, including roads, airports, water, sanitation, energy, and waste management. When we invest in this infrastructure, we are building opportunities for small resorts, village tours, young people in the North, and communities that have waited too long for their share of tourism benefits.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are still in the first phase of a 10-year programme where we set the foundations for the future of tourism in the North. This means, having a place well-informed master plans, identifying what investments will carry us forward, and building institutional capacity building. Over the next few phases, we will take what we have learnt and put it into action and put in physical and social capital infrastructure that capitalises on the findings from the first phase. These investments will prioritise the development of viable and critical mid-size infrastructure and essential services that will enable the opening of new areas of tourism investment. Private sector development will be a core. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are already seeing some quick wins, such as the Community-based Tourism Small-scale Infrastructure Grants, and Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and women-led enterprise capacity building programmes. We have received over 300 applicants who will soon be supported.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, obviously we cannot stop at the borders of Vanua Levu. We are setting our sights further to the untapped potential of new frontiers like Lau, where we have spent this year laying the groundwork. We are already seeing the quick wins. We are finding practical ways to turn vacant homes into vibrant, community-based homestays.

One of the clearest signals in this budget is the continued support for the Pilot Tourism MSME Fund, increased to $500,000 (up from $400,000 last year), an increase of 25 percent. In a reduced fiscal environment, that increase carries a clear message: tourism is not only about large hotels. It is also about small operators, family businesses, village experiences, cultural performers, tour guides, homestays, artisans and community-based enterprises.

Tourism not only brings visitors to Fiji. Tourism must bring opportunities for Fijians. Our work under the Fiji Sustainable Tourism Framework continues to guide this direction, and in a time of fiscal restraint, we must protect the programmes that create the most direct impact in communities. In the two financial years that we have implemented this pilot, we have assisted approximately 42 tourism micro and small enterprises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is also the first budget period, following the enactment of Tourism Act 2026 (Act No. 7 of 2026) received Presidential Assent on 2nd June, 2026, marking a major milestone in the modernisation of Fiji's tourism governance. For decades, Fiji operated under an outdated legal framework that no longer reflected the diversity and complexity of the modern tourism industry. The Tourism Act 2026 gives us a modern platform to recognise, register, and support the full breadth of the industry, from adventure and cultural tourism to wellness, marine experiences, homestays and digital platforms.

Work is now underway on the regulations that will translate the Act into practical systems and standards for operators. This is about visibility, coordination and opportunity. Fiji now has the legal foundation to govern its tourism industry the way it deserves with clarity, fairness and a framework built for what the industry actually is today. The budget also supports one of Fiji's key reforms to ensure government is building an industry the way it deserves, with clarity, fairness and a framework built for what the industry actually is today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget also supports one of Fiji's key reforms to ensure our people have fairer participation in growing the tourism economy. The Commercial Use of Marine Areas Bill 2025 also known as CUMA, will repeal the outdated Regulation of Surfing Areas Act 2010 and establish a modern, transparent framework that recognises the proprietary rights of customary owners over marine areas used for commercial tourism purposes. It empowers resource owners while providing certainty for investors through a fair and lawful process. The Bill is currently before Parliament and undergoing public consultation through the Standing Committee process and we expect to finalise the legislation during the new financial year.

For a country of some 300 islands, aviation is not a luxury, it is a necessity that connects people to hospitals, schools, markets, families and economic opportunity. The Domestic Air Services Subsidy has been allocated to $2.31 million, an increase of $170,000 or approximately 7.9 percent. This matters for communities in Kadavu, Lau, Rotuma and Lomaiviti where air services may not be commercially viable but remain socially and economically essential.

The increased support is particularly significant to the people of Ovalau, that is, Bureta, Moala and Ono-i-Lau who can now once again enjoy regular air services after a lapse of more than a decade. The restoration of these routes reconnects communities that have long faced limited transport options, improving access to medical services, education, government services, business opportunities and family networks. It also strengthens tourism and economic activity, ensuring that residents of these maritime islands are better connected to the rest of Fiji and are able to share more fully in the country's development.

Work will also progress on assessing future air connectivity, options for Gau, with the aim of supporting economic growth, strengthening tourism and improving access to markets and essential services for the people of the island. We will continue progressing the proposed Yasawa Airport project, building on the preliminary work undertaken. This initiative has the potential to transform connectivity in the region, opening new avenues for tourism, stimulating economic activity, supporting livelihoods and bringing the benefits of growth closer to island communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the first time, Fiji has developed a long-term strategic blueprint for civil aviation infrastructure, services, safety, connectivity and growth. The 2026-2027 Budget has allocated $180,000 to implement Fiji's Civil Aviation Master Plan. Through this work, we are laying the foundation for a more connected, competitive, and future-ready aviation sector, one that strengthens Fiji's position as a regional aviation hub, while creating new opportunities for economic growth, investment, and development across our islands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government has made significant progress on the development of the Civil Aviation Bill, which will modernise Fiji's Civil Aviation Legislative Framework, undertake all the consultations have been completed, and legislative drafting is currently underway. Work on the Bill will continue into the 2026-2027 financial year, including its progression through the necessary approval process. This will ensure that Fiji maintains a robust, future-focused regulatory framework that supports innovation, international compliance and our continued position as a safe, secure and reliable aviation hub in the Pacific.

The Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji received an operating grant of $6.2 million, which has been revised accordingly with a whole-of-government grant reduction. The commitment to aviation safety, however, remains firm and non-negotiable. There can be no compromise on safety. It is the foundation of public confidence and Fiji's credibility as an aviation hub.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2026-2027 National Budget recognises the pressures before us, the global fuel crisis, rising operating costs, pressure on public revenue, and the need to manage national expenditure with discipline.

To our tourism and aviation stakeholders, our message is clear. The Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation will continue to serve with focus, discipline, and determination. We will protect the industry; we will support connectivity and grow opportunities. I support the budget and will continue working to ensure that Fiji remains a resilient, competitive, and trusted tourism and aviation destination. God bless Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- I suggest to honourable Members that we take a half-an-hour tea break now. For those of you who may be wondering if there will be a suspension motion under Standing Order 23, I advise that the Business Committee, by approving the extended sitting hours for this week has wavered the requirement under the Standing Order. So honourable Members, our proceedings is suspended, we will resume in half-an-hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.27 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 5.01 p.m.

HON. A.N. TUICOLO.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, fellow citizens who are watching the livestream from home - very warm greetings and good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to offer my brief contribution to the 2026-2027 Appropriation Bill currently before this august House. Before I proceed, I want to express my deepest gratitude to the Almighty God for the privilege and strength to serve into this final year of our parliamentary term. I also want to take this moment to commend the honourable Minister for Finance, Commerce and Business Development, alongside the Permanent Secretary and their dedicated team for their hard work in delivering this 2026-2027 Budget.

Mr. Speaker, the Fiji 2026-2027 National Budget outlines a financial plan with a projected total revenue of $3.82 billion and an expenditure of $4.87 billion, resulting in a fiscal deficit of $1 billion, which is about 7 percent of GDP. The expansionary Budget prioritises long-term economic resilience, social welfare and major public infrastructure.

The Budget prioritises critical sectors with substantial funding increases:

(1) The healthcare sector receives $647 million, a $181.4 million boost to address infrastructure, medical supplies and staff salaries.
(2) Social Protection is allocated $183.9 million to support over 180,000 citizens through disability, family assistance and pension schemes.
(3) Agriculture and Waterways get $221 million for research, mechanisation, subsidies and dredging, while the Water Authority of Fiji is granted $291 million to upgrade water and wastewater systems.
(4) $500 million is set aside for Miscellaneous Services, which includes $160 million for the Fijian Scholarship Scheme and $120 million for healthcare public-private partnerships.

Mr. Speaker, one of the most critical infrastructure sector by governments worldwide is the water and wastewater systems. They are considered vital because their disruption would immediately threaten public health, national security and economic stability of any government. Access to clean and safe water is a fundamental human right. We commend the Coalition Government for allocating $291 million to Water Authority of Fiji for the upgrade and expansion of water and wastewater infrastructure around the country.

Mr. Speaker, with the Government investment in water and wastewater infrastructure, it will protect public health, safeguard coastal ecosystems and drive economic growth. These upgrades will ensure access to safe drinking water, prevent untreated sewage from polluting local environments and boost resilience against climate change and natural disasters.

Mr. Speaker, we welcome the budget of $883 million allocated to the education sector. Fijian teachers have long endured severe hardships, particularly regarding delayed salaries and inadequate rural allowances. However, with $434 million now dedicated to the wages of over 13,000 educators, I am confident that the Ministry will decisively resolve these longstanding issues. This vital funding will safeguard teacher welfare through targeted policies, necessary salary adjustments, and stronger support frameworks.

Mr. Speaker, I commend the Coalition Government for its continued commitment to our families, specifically through the allocation of $61 million for the Free Education Grant, $54 million for Transport Assistance, and $40 million for Back-to-School support.

Mr. Speaker, while the State provides this foundational support across education, transport and health, parents and guardians must also honour their responsibilities. True national development requires a whole of society approach, which is impossible without parents staying actively involved in their children's daily lives, growth and moral guidance.

Turning to Higher Education, I applaud the Coalition Government for allocating $74.5 million in operating grants to our tertiary institutions. We also warmly welcome the $160 million provided in the 2026-2027 Budget to fund scholarships, supporting 14,000 existing students, and creating pathways for 9,000 new ones. I extend my gratitude to the Tertiary Scholarship and Loans Service (TSLS) Board for its continuous funding of tuition fees for students across both, government and non-government higher Education institutions.

Mr. Speaker, I stand in full support of the new anti-abuse measures implemented by TSLS. The introduction of the four-installment allowance payouts, active attendance verification, tighter oversight and strict disbursement rules will effectively crack down on any exploitation of State funding. I urge all the TSLS-sponsored students to act as responsible citizens, respect taxpayers' funds and strictly avoid any abuse of this vital government assistance.

Mr. Speaker, to diversify our economy, empower rural communities, boost exports and ensure food security, we must invest heavily in agriculture. We welcome the $221 million allocation provided to the Ministry of Agriculture, Waterways and Sugar Industry, and the $96.3 million support towards the sugar industry, despite the industry facing a severe downturn. As highlighted by the Permanent Secretary for Finance, Mr. Shiri Gounder, during a post-budget forum in Nadi, Fiji's sugar sector is no longer sustainable in its current form.

Mr. Speaker, looking back at our history, in 1926, the Colonial Sugar Refinery (CSR) Company achieved a near-monopoly over Fiji's sugar production, successfully managing major facilities, such as the Lautoka and Rarawai Mills. During this era, the company owned extensive corporate plantations and leased smaller plots to individual farmers.

One of the most critical challenges facing our sugar industry today is that it no longer owns large-scale corporate plantations, relying solely on smallholder farmers. This dependency creates severe vulnerabilities. Whenever these smallholder farmers choose to strike or boycott the harvest, the Fiji Sugar Corporation suffers immediate and devastating operational, financial and reputational consequences. I strongly recommend that the Government re-evaluates the operational model utilised by CSR. We should explore the feasibility of Fiji sugar industry taking direct ownership and operating large-scale corporate plantations once again.

Mr. Speaker, we highly commend the Coalition Government's $38.8 million budgetary allocation to the Land Transport Authority (LTA) to improve transport services and road safety. This vital funding will drive digital transformation, empowering Fijians to renew driver's licence, pay Traffic Infringement Notices (TINs), and update profiles directly from the comfort of their homes or workplaces.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also applaud the amnesty offered by the Coalition Government to assist owners of grounded roadworthy vehicles. By waiving accumulated wheel tax and road user levy arrears, this initiative provides a clean slate for compliant vehicle owners to pass fitness inspections and renew their registration without the burden of historical penalties.

We welcome the one-million-dollar allocation to build four lighthouses on Yadua Island, Makuluva Islet, Taveuni (Vuna Point) and Kadavu (Cape Washington). These structures serve as vital physical backups to modern digital navigation. By marking treacherous shoals and guiding vessels safely into ports, they protect our sailors when digital systems fail. Furthermore, they provide critical assistance during severe storms or GPS outages, preventing ships from running aground and helping mariners calculate their exact offshore location. Ultimately, these projects will significantly strengthen navigational safety and prevent maritime accidents across Fiji waters.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge all Fijians to maximise the benefits of this Budget by accessing the various Government assistance programmes available across our Ministries and agencies. These initiatives are designed to improve livelihoods, drive economic growth and strengthen our social safety nets. *Vina valevu*, and I support the motion before the House.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, and fellow Fijians listening in through television or streaming on social media. Good afternoon and *ni sa bula vinaka*.

I rise today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to support the debate on the fourth Budget of the People's Coalition and, of course, to state the obvious, the final budget before we go to the polls towards the end of this year.

A lot of naysayers, predicted that the People’s Coalition would not last, suffice to say, that we have delivered three very good budgets and a strong stable and honest Government that has been working hard to rebuild our beloved country.

I would also like to acknowledge the former Minister for Finance, my seat neighbour and friend, the honourable Professor Prasad, who has capably managed the country's coffers for the last three budgets.

In delivering his Budget address, the honourable Minister for Finance titled his Budget, “A Responsible Budget for a Sustainable Future,” which I whole heartedly agree. Why? Because, this is not an election budget - it is because it underpins all the hard work that has been taking place over the last three years. It confronts the issues we need to address as a nation regarding how we spend money, provides relief to cushion the global crisis we are facing, and then deftly pivots to the private sector to drive growth and focus on productive infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, much has been said about the debt in Fiji, and I would like to read an extract from the Budget Supplement. According to the latest Article IV Consultation Report by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), released in May 2026, “Fiji's public debt remains sustainable, although debt vulnerability is assessed as moderate.” My message to this august House and to the rest of Fiji is that there is no need to panic. Essentially, our challenge is that our current economic growth is not enough. We need everyone to work together as a nation, everybody together to grow our economic pie.

If we work to deliver an average of 5 percent or 10 percent growth over the next five years to 10 years, we should be able to stabilise our nation's coffers and plot a stronger path to prosperity. This is how we resolve our debt issue in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, like I have said, we do not need to panic. The building blocks are in place, and I will return to this commentary later.

Before I provide an overview on the Budget, I would like to briefly reflect on the last three years. When this side of the House took over Government, we realised that we had inherited something "akin" to Nabukalou Creek - at high tide, looking very beautiful, or using my mother's dialect, *igaiga re,* but another story when the tide goes out.

Democracy that existed since 2014, was a mirage. The Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) did not exist. The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) was under threat of splinter. All of us saw a Civil Service that was under-resourced, fearful, and not empowered. Retirement at 55 or before turning 55 was a regular joke. The Civil Service had not received a raise since 2017. Teachers, doctors and nurse's salaries needed addressing. Many laws and regulations were shockingly out of date. Financial accountability was not good. We had some entities, in Government that had not been audited in the last 10 years. We saw evidence of wasteful and irresponsible spending.

When honourable Tuisawau entered his Ministry, he discovered that his 2022 Budget in December, halfway through the year, had been fully utilised. There were excessive film rebates of around $400 million to be exact, $160 million which was unpaid when we got into office. The Walesi spending saga of $130 million, the Lautoka Swimming Pool, Sukuna Park, the incomplete FNU Labasa Campus, the retrospective adjustment in Capital Gains Tax that gave away $70 million of Fiji's hard-earned taxpayers money.

In my estimate, Mr. Speaker, Sir, almost one billion dollars was squandered quite easily by the former Government, and that is not even talking about sugar yet.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- There were significant under investments in water and health. Education needed reform, and there was under investment in vocational training. In terms of HIV and drugs, I am not sure anything was done. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this side of the House inherited a mess. In fact, the Bainimarama boom was really the Bainimarama bluff.

So, over the last three years' budgets, including this Budget, we have been fixing the mess and rebuilding Fiji. What has been achieved? We have brought back true democracy to this country!

(Chorus of interjection)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Separation of powers now exists, and the rule of law is respected. The GCC has returned. We have repealed Bill No.17. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have restored PIF's unity by visiting the Government of Kiribati after a few months in office and as such, has restored Fiji's position as a true partner in the Pacific. We removed the Media Decree. We have brought back media freedom and free speech and are now funding all media companies through the Public Service Grant, not just a select few. The civil servants' pay has been addressed. There is an institute that has been created to train our civil servants. Retirement age was increased to 60 years. Doctors and nurses' pay has also been increased.

Through the Public Accounts Committee, which was ably led by honourable Immanuel when he was Chair and each Minister is focussed on financial accountability. Who can forget honourable Siromi Turaga tabling the financial statements of the Attorney-General's Office and the Ministry of Justice from 2015 to 2022 recently? At the end of this year, the Public Accounts Committee hopes to have completed and debated the Whole of Government Reports up to 2024. This will bring the accounts of Government and its scrutiny up to date. That is true accountability, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Laws have been progressively reformed. The Education Act, the Mahogany Act, the Aquaculture Act, Forestry Act, to name a few. In fact, 95 Bills have been through this Parliament – 85 have been enacted, 86 percent execution rate.

A new education curriculum has been developed. There has been a major investment in TVET and vocational training, including apprenticeships. In the last three budgets, Mr. Speaker, Sir, including this one, you would not have seen the type of wanton mismanagement and spending, that I have alluded to before.

In fact, the VAT that was increased went straight back into Government programmes and priorities. Spending in social welfare has increased and covering from 90,000 Fijians in 2022 to 134,000 Fijians to date. There has been more funding to key Ministries such as Health, Education, Rural Development, Waterways, Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, and so forth.

Most critically, this budget is now addressing virtually every problem that we inherited from the previous government. The under-investment in infrastructure covering health, renewable energy, road, port infrastructure, water, wastewater, flood alleviation and airport expansion by the last government is being addressed once and for all. A total investment of $7 billion is being estimated. One has to wonder, Mr. Speaker, Sir, why this was never comprehensively addressed in the last 16 years to 2022.

The HIV and drug issues are now being addressed in the budget and discussed openly as national issues. As a result, we have the whole country working together with Government to attack these issues. The termite issue now has a solution, thanks to honourable Tubuna and honourable Kiran. Funding is provided in this budget. And finally, we have a constitution that is being reviewed and will be taken to the people of Fiji this year, for a final vote.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I would like to support the wise words of caution made by the honourable Minister for Finance, and I quote, "we need to leave within our means, make prudent choices, and invest in foundations that will strengthen the economy, create jobs, and secure a stable future for all Fijians." In a nutshell, over the years, the previous government, as well as our government, developed a desire, quite correctly, to increase public expenditure, especially in areas of social need. However, if you add on the wanton waste of one billion dollars that I alluded to, and the impacts of *TC Winston* and COVID-19, that is why we have reached a position where our fiscal space is constrained.

I agree with the honourable Minister's comments on sentiments about reviewing the civil service and making it more efficient. However, digital transformation must drive this strategy. My humble request to the honourable Minister for Finance will be, to properly fund the National Digital Strategy for Fiji. I see an allocation of $145 million in the newly signed Australian Treaty covering digitisation, which is very positive.

Apart from this, the Parliamentary Select Committee on Sugar is looking to addressing sugar as an industry once and for all. We spend at least over $60 million per annum on sugar subsidies, and this is obviously unsustainable. I support the idea of a sovereign wealth fund proposed, as it will future proof our economy in future from external shocks. For those who do not know what a sovereign wealth fund is, google Kiribati Sovereign Wealth Fund and you will understand why it is critical.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir I support the 5 percent tourism levy, imposed to assist Fiji Airways. Keeping Fiji Airways in the air is crucial. I would like to remind the tourism industry that at one stage, they were imposed the Environment and Climate Adaptation Levy (ECAL) and turnover taxes, which amounted to 15 percent, and complaints were muffled. The assistance is only for one year, which is not unreasonable. No doubt, some tough decisions will need to be made in the next four years, and I have no doubt that this side of the House is up to the task.

I thought I would spend the remainder of my speech, outlining why I believe this Government is well positioned, to achieve the desired growth of 5 percent. Very simply, the collaboration with the private sector is starting to manifest in real economic diversification. Ease of doing business has been pursued, with digital transformation being the key driver, and efforts to boost the MSME and co-operative ecosystem continues.

Despite the headwinds of the Iraq-US conflict, resulting in the downward GDP trajectory from 3 percent to 1.5 percent, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our underlying economy is strong. Liquidity remains high, which helps the cost of borrowing, and foreign reserves are stable. The investment pipeline has grown from 2022 at $4 billion to $8.9 billion presently, a growth of over 200 percent, showing positive momentum and absolute confidence in the Fijian economy. Out of the 254 projects in the pipeline, 112 projects valued at $2.2 billion are actually under construction. These are real jobs created.

The tourism industry required 5,000 rooms. Out of this, 1,441 rooms will come online in 2027, and 2,471 rooms are planned beyond 2027 in conceptual state. My prediction, tourism is poised for some significant growth. Google is investing in Fiji, if you do not believe me, go down to Natadola, they are building a data operation centre, as we speak. Starlink will open up to remote areas around the country.120 villages are receiving their Starlink connections, as we speak. The Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector is booming, Mr. Speaker, Sir, 8,000 jobs so far, and over $300 million in foreign exchange. At least six new BPO operators have entered the country since 2022.

The Lyndhurst Business Park is about to be constructed in commercial agriculture. You have Fiji Water, Aitken Spence looking at serious commercial agriculture in Fiji, and more importantly, partnering with the iTaukei institutions. A few companies are producing vegetables at scale, Mr. Speaker, Sir, exports of pineapples have begun recently. The Kava Bill is on its way. The Medicinal Cannabis Bill is on its way. In Ra, a company called ONA Coffee is looking at developing speciality coffee in Fiji. They have set up in Rakiraki. Apart from Fiji Water, Ra will also be known as the home of speciality coffee in the years to come. *Sa yadra.*

A 300-acre cocoa, turmeric and ginger farm is being set up in Dreketi. Several aquaculture initiatives such as prawn farming, are being pursued. Nama Fiji has opened up very interesting opportunities in terms of seaweed cosmetics. In forestry, the Mahogany Bill has been tabled, and we can unlock a potential $100 million industry in Fiji.

Other areas of potential, Mr. Speaker, Sir, include Film Fiji. Given that we have now paid down the liabilities given by the previous government, down to $8 million from $160 million. Also in manufacturing, where AI is now being developed in Fiji. Apart from this, as we know, the MSME and co-operative ecosystem is expanding. A strategic plan has been put in place, and access to finance has been made easier.

More importantly, there is a laser focus on the *iTaukei* economy. With Fijian Holdings Limited, Merchant Finance, the iTaukei Trust Fund and ITLTB offering financing packages as appropriate that will supplement the direct support by the Government. As you can see, we have not been messing around. A lot has been done to build a genuinely diversified economy across the economic spectrum.

In terms of digital transformation, I will not say too much, other than to say, that we have discussed in this House ad nauseum what is happening in the digital transformation space.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in closing, the 2026-2027 Budget brings to a head the hard work of the People's Coalition. It is a fact that virtually all the problems we inherited are being addressed.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- From returning to real democracy, to reforms, the building blocks, for the "New Fiji" are being put in place. We have an answer to the debt issue. However, we need to work together. All of us need to roll up our sleeves and work hard. *Sa rauta na vucesa.* Economic diversification, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this country is real. The private sector collaboration so far has been genuine, and the ease of business pathway through digitisation has begun and will transform Fiji. It has been my honour to serve the people of Fiji over the last three years. And of course, there is still so much to do. God willing, we will return to continue the work of rebuilding Fiji.

With a constitutional reset on the horizon, I am optimistic about Fiji's future, and I fully support the Budget of 2026-2027.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to offer my full support to the motion before this honourable House. This motion under the 2026-2027 National Budget reflects our commitment to the well-being, security and prosperity of the people of Fiji. I commend the honourable Minister for Finance, Commerce and Business Development and his team for the hard work they have ensued, especially at a time of global economic uncertainty brought about by the global energy crisis driven by the war in Iran.

May I also take this opportunity to thank the oil companies for their commitment to ensuring that fuel and oil supplies remain uninterrupted during this difficult time. Because Fiji imports all its fuel, any conflict affecting oil supplies, immediately raises transport costs, electricity generation costs, food prices and inflation. Especially if it affects the Strait of Hormuz, given 20.3 million barrels of crude oil pass through the strait daily.

This Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is designed to preserve economic stability while protecting households and businesses from the external shocks. The key features of the budget in the context of the Iran crisis include maintaining fiscal discipline despite reduced revenue expectations caused by higher fuel costs and slower global economic activity. No new income tax or corporate tax increases, allowing households and businesses to retain more disposable income during a period of rising living costs. No reduction in public salaries, protecting employment and domestic demand.

May I take this opportunity to thank all civil servants for the work that you do in the various industries that you work for. There is continued investment in essential public services, including health, education, infrastructure and security, recognising that national resilience depends on strong institutions. And there are measures to cushion the cost of living, acknowledging that important inflation remains Fiji's greatest economic vulnerability.

From a strategic perspective, the Budget reflects three important policy objectives:

(1) Economic resilience, ensuring government finances remain sustainable despite global volatility.
(2) Social protection, shielding vulnerable households from the effects of higher fuel and food prices.

(3) National security and resilience, maintaining investment in border management, maritime security, disaster preparedness, and critical infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for Fiji immigration, the Iran crisis reinforces the importance of resilient border management. International conflicts can generate irregular migration, increase the demand for humanitarian protection, disrupt international travel and heighten the need for robust passenger screening and intelligence sharing. At the same time, economic pressure may encourage greater labour mobility across the Pacific. Continued investment in immigration technology, border security and regional cooperation therefore becomes not only a security priority but also an economic necessity.

In the 2026-2027 Budget, the Ministry of Immigration is allocated $14.8 million. The budget shows Government's commitment to the continuation and finalisation of the modernisation of immigration laws and regulations, the acquisition of modern border management tools and systems, the provision of passport books for citizens, tackling human trafficking, and decentralising immigration services to allow easier access for our citizens and customers.

Since the formation of the Ministry of Immigration on the 10th January, 2025, Government has been committing to modernising immigration systems and capabilities. It is a strategic national capability that protects our sovereignty, strengthens our economy, facilitates investment, supports tourism, combats transnational crime and safeguards the dignity and security of every person who enters or leaves our borders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji sits at the crossroads of the Pacific. Every year, hundreds of thousands of people cross our borders; tourists, investors, workers, students, and returning citizens. In 2025, 986,367 visitors visited our shores. The current estimation is that this year, 2026, the number of visitors will surpass the 1 million mark, and each arrival brings opportunity, yet, every arrival also carries responsibility. Every person that crosses our border is an immigration customer. Our responsibility is to ensure that legitimate travellers are welcomed with efficiency and professionalism, while those who seek to exploit our waters, are identified before they can do harm. This budget enables us to meet both those responsibilities.

In this day and age of advanced technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI), border-related risk assessment can begin long before an aircraft lands or a vessel reaches our shores. That is why the Government in the current budget year approved the acquisition of Advanced Passenger Information (API) and Passenger Name Records (PNR) data system. This capability will enable immigration officers to receive passenger information before arrival, allowing risk assessments to be conducted well in advance. Mr. Speaker, Sir, these two datasets, API and PNR, can only be provided to us, if it is a requirement by law. I am pleased to report that this has been done through the new Immigration Act that was passed in this House in the May sitting.

Running concurrent to the review of the Act was the tender process, to select a vendor for the system, and that tender has also been awarded. Now that the provision of the two datasets is codified into law, we will be signing the contract with the vendor before this month ends.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the work on system design, configuration, testing, and deployment of this API PNR Gateway will commence in August, with the commencement of this 2026-2027 Budget year, and the plan is to have the first Airline Certification by October this year, and to have five airlines on board by January 2027. There is a phase two of the project where we will enable various modules for intelligence and targeting.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this API-PNR Gateway, is being built on a self-funding model - as has been successfully implemented in other countries. This is a potential revenue earner for Government. Also, in this 2026 - 2027 budget year, a new Border Management System will be put in place and will eventually replace the current system. We are being assisted by Australia in this project for which we are so grateful. Consultation and technical work on the design and implementation of this new Border Management System has already started and is ongoing, and we are targeting the full functionality of some modules before the end of this year.

These two systems, the API-PNR and the Merit Border Management System, will eventually integrate. The end state of this modernisation is full automation at our borders, where Fiji citizens and legitimate non-citizen travellers are facilitated through faster, and thorough scrutiny is directed to those flagged by the system.

These changes are being put in place at a time when visitors arrivals will be surpassing the 1 million mark and also, when we are having an increasing number of foreign workers crossing our borders. When border traffic is constantly increasing, so do the risks and threats associated with terrorism and organised crime. We are putting in place modern tools to mitigate these risks and threats. Our objective in this technological investment and modernisation drive is straightforward. Low-risk travellers should experience faster processing. High-risk travellers should receive greater scrutiny.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for our Fiji citizens, automation and e-gates at our borders is meaningless if they do not have a passport. In this budget, $5 million is allocated for the procurement of 100,000 blank passport books. This is a repeat of the 100,000 procured in this budget year. This will ensure that there are enough books available well into the 2027-2028 budget year. Along the same vein of passport services, we have technicians who are currently working on a system upgrade that will make applications for passports more convenient, where a lot more can be done online, rather than appearing in person at an Immigration office.

This budget also supports our commitment to bring Immigration services closer to the people through the decentralisation of service delivery. In the 2026-2027 budget year, Immigration will also operate from two new offices. The establishment of our new Immigration Office in Nakasi represents a significant step in improving access to the rapidly growing and dense populations of the Suva-Nausori corridor. Instead of requiring members of the public to travel into central Suva, many essential Immigration services will now be available closer to where they live and work.

This initiative will reduce travel time, ease congestion in our Suva office, improve customer experience, and enable our officers to provide more efficient and responsive services. This move to Nakasi is also in anticipation of more international flights into and out of Nausori Airport, where we will have referral offices closer at Nakasi, rather than coming all the way from Suva. There is also allocation in this Budget to renovate the Immigration office in Nausori Airport, again in anticipation of more international flights, and the utilisation of API and PNR services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also expanding our presence to Rakiraki. The opening of an Immigration office in Rakiraki reflects our determination to ensure that Government services are accessible to all Fijians, regardless of where they reside. For the communities of Ra and neighbouring districts, this means easier access to passport services and immigration advice without the need for lengthy and costly travel. This decentralisation is about more than convenience; it is about equitable service delivery and ensuring that every citizen has access to high quality public services closer to home.

Another important allocation in the recent budget is the $225,000 dedicated to combatting human trafficking and strengthening compliance with international best practices. Human trafficking remains one of the most serious crimes confronting the international community. It exploits the vulnerable, destroys families, and undermines the rule of law. This allocation will be utilised to enhance officer training, improve victim identification, strengthen our investigative capability, and reinforce cooperation with regional and international partners.

Mr. Speaker Sir, digital transformation remains central to our future. Modern immigration systems rely on secure information management, biometric verification, automated risk assessment, and real-time intelligence sharing. Investment in technology is not merely an operational improvement, it is an investment in national security.

This budget reflects a balance. It invests in secure passports for immigration, it strengthens actions against human trafficking, it modernises border technology, it improves airport security, it supports investment, it enhances service delivery, and it prepares Fiji for future migration challenges while protecting our national interests. The allocation of $14.8 million is therefore not simply an expenditure, it is an investment in national security, an investment in economic growth, an investment in international confidence, an investment in public service excellence, most importantly, it is an investment in the future resilience of Fiji.

May I digress a little bit and acknowledge and thank the Minister for Finance for the tax incentives that is provided in this budget for those that want to invest in building animal shelters and those that want to donate to animal centers. Thank you for that provision.

I must acknowledge the Honorable Prime Minister's wisdom to create a stand-alone Ministry of Immigration. Because in doing so, he has allowed immigration the freedom to transform into what it should have been already, a modern, 21st century-ready border control and security agency. The technological developments that I had highlighted is the catalyst for this transformation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this small and young ministry is a revenue earner for Government. If you look at the budget book, apart from FRCS and LTA, immigration is third. When this transformation is completed, we see this happening at the earliest, around the end of 2027, and at the latest by 2028. The Ministry of Immigration could be hived off into a statutory authority, reducing government costs, and it will be a significant revenue earner for government also.

None of these ambitions can be achieved without the dedicated men and women of the Ministry of Immigration. They operate in demanding environments, requiring sound judgement, professionalism, and integrity. I take this opportunity to acknowledge their commitment and thank them for their dedicated service to our nation.

With those remarks, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I offer my full support to the motion on the 2026-2027 Budget that is before this august House.

HON. S. KIRAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, Members of Parliament. Dear Fiji, *cola vina, namaste, ram ram, ni bula vinaka.*

I rise to support the 2026-2027 National Budget, themed, *“A responsible Budget for Sustainable Future.”* This Budget demonstrates the Coalition Government's commitment to responsible fiscal management while making meaningful investments in the people of Fiji. It recognises that sustainable development extends beyond economic growth, requiring continued investment in the dignity, well-being and potential of every Fijian.

The Coalition Government has consistently strengthened social welfare support. The 15 percent increase introduced in 2023-2024, including the 25 percent increase for beneficiaries aged 70 years and above, as well as the additional 5 percent increase provided in 2025-2026 have all been maintained in this Budget, despite ongoing fiscal pressure.

In addition, to help mitigate the impact of the fuel crisis, all social welfare beneficiaries have received a 50 percent increase in their assistance across the board over the past three months. These measures reflect the Government's unwavering commitment to protecting the vulnerable households, while responsibly balancing national priorities and maintaining physical display.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection has been allocated $211 million. This budget allows the Ministry to continue strengthening Fiji's social protection system, expand child protection services, advance women's economic empowerment, improve support for survivors of violence and enhance services for older persons and persons living with disabilities.

Allocation of $189.3 million in this budget enables us to continue to support more than 130,000 vulnerable Fijians. This includes $86.2 million for the Social Pension Scheme, $38.3 million for the Family Assistance Scheme, $18.5 million for the Disability Allowance Scheme, $18.4 million for the Child Protection Allowance, and $22 million for the Transport Assistance Scheme. With an additional $465,615 for the Rural Pregnant Mothers Food Allowance.

The Social Pension Scheme has received an increase of $4.16 million in anticipation of more applications from senior citizens, and the Transport Assistance Scheme has been allocated an additional $7.9 million. There is an 11 percent increase in allowance for rural pregnant mothers as well. We also appreciate the continued budget allocation for the Welfare Graduation Programme, revived in the last financial year.

Continued budget support of more than $1 million from the Government of Fiji and Australia in the next financial year to advance social protection reforms will transform service delivery by improving efficiency, reducing duplication, strengthening data integrity and enabling faster evidence-based decision making. This Budget also provides for the procurement of much needed IT equipment and network cabling to ensure that all our Ministry offices across Fiji are equipped to support the implementation of these reforms. Together these reforms are laying the foundation for a stronger, more responsive and sustainable social protection system that is better equipped to meet the needs of the people of Fiji.

Working alongside our development partners, we are implementing the Fiji's Adaptive Social Protection Strategy, which was developed with the support from the World Bank. The national strategy is designed to ensure that Fiji's social protection systems can anticipate, prepare for and respond rapidly to future shocks.

Our partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) has also delivered the Climate Risk Assistance Pilot Project, which currently supports 5,136 social protection beneficiaries. During the recent heavy rainfall and flooding event, more than 1,300 vulnerable households qualified to receive emergency cash assistance through this pilot.

In partnership with the World Food Programme and telecommunications service providers, we have launched the Social Protection Helpline 1561, providing our beneficiaries with a dedicated toll-free service to access information, seek assistance, provide feedback and lodge complaints.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the needs of our vulnerable communities continue to evolve, marked by an increasing demand for child protection services and specialised support for children affected by substance abuse. Safeguarding our children remains a core responsibility of our Ministry. To meet its statutory obligations, the Department of Children has been allocated $3.7 million. This funding will directly support the implementation of the landmark Child Care and Protection Act and the Child Justice Act, while facilitating the expansion of vital child safeguarding services. With the invaluable backing of our technical and development partners, we remain firmly focused on strengthening child-centred interventions that prioritise prevention, rehabilitation and family empowerment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the first time last year, we commemorated the International Day of the Girl Child to draw critical attention to the unique challenges faced by our young girls. While we continue to collaborate with our partners to establish robust awareness and protection mechanisms for our girls, we are simultaneously working with stakeholders to design targeted programmes for at-risk adolescent boys.

In direct response to the escalating national drug crisis, we are supporting Empower Pacific to establish a dedicated alcohol and drug recovery centre for boys in Lautoka. The budget also supports the setup of a specialised rehabilitation facility for boys found on the streets. This facility is being built in Suva with the partnership of Habitat for Humanity. These children cannot be accommodated within our existing residential care homes due to exposure to illicit substances and health complexities like HIV. They require a highly specialised rehabilitation environment to stabilise and heal, before they can be successfully reintegrated into formal education institutions.

This budget also allows much needed upgrade of the Fiji Juvenile Rehabilitation and Development Centre. The 29.6 percent increase in allocation to the community-based corrections, reflects Government's continued commitment to strengthening rehabilitation, reintegration and alternatives to institutional placement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the safety and well-being of our children dictate the future of our nation. To address the persistent challenge of child abuse and neglect, we have partnered with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) to deliver an innovative solution straight to the doorsteps of Fijian families. Our nation's first dedicated parenting app. Studies show that structured parenting programmes reduce child neglect and abuse by up to 45 percent. A sincere thanks goes to the Ministries of Health, Education, Policing and Communications and all stakeholders whose collaborative efforts ensured the app's features are culturally relevant and tailored to Fiji. This digital tool complements our existing safety nets as we continue to fund the Toll-Free Child Helpline number 1335, to ensure immediate rapid communication for any child in distress.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government continues to invest in ageing with dignity and disability inclusion as well. This Government inherited severe infrastructure backlogs. When we took office, we found that residents of the Lautoka Golden Age Home were living in termite infested, dilapidated structures that posed extreme occupational health and safety hazards. Recognising this as an urgent priority, we safely relocated the residents to a fully renovated interim facility, while we finalised plans for a brand new purpose built complex.

We are systematically addressing ageing infrastructure across the country. This budget also enables us to commence work on replacing the Suva Golden Age Home, which has far outlived its structural lifespan at about 80 years old. To expand our national care capacity, the Government provided targeted financial assistance to Habitat for Humanity Fiji, during the last financial year. The crucial partnership aims to upgrade the Valelevu HART Nursing Facility, expected to conclude next month to secure dignified accommodation for 60 more elders requiring specialised care.

The National Development Plan 2025-2029 paved the way for the review of the Disability Policy and in June 2025, the Government endorsed the Fiji National Policy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2025-2035. It is this document that guides efforts for disability inclusion, equity and meaningful participation of people with disabilities. Disability services remain a top priority for this Government as evidence by our substantial and consecutive funding increases.

To provide a clear comparison, the disability budget stood at $19 million during the 2021-2022 financial year before this Government took reign, nearly double to $40 million during last financial year, and has now reached a historic allocation of $55 million across different Government ministries in this budget. We also appreciate the increase in allocation for the Economic Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities that was piloted in the last financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to understand what people with disabilities need, Government supported the National Council of Persons with Disabilities, revived its advisory committees as well as its district committees. In tangent to this, the secretariat arm of Council is being strengthened. This is crucial to ensure we have a 'bottom-up approach' and a 'top-down' resourcing flow. We are thankful for the support from the Australian Government for Disability sector and their contribution towards the development and launch of the Guidebook on Employment for Persons with Disabilities which is an inclusive guide for Employers to hiring and supporting employees with disabilities in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, as a government, we stand strong by our commitment to people living with disabilities and I take this time to thank Fiji organisations for persons with disabilities, family members, community service providers, faith-based organisations and development partners. This Budget further reinforces the Government's commitment to advancing gender equality and empowering women and girls across Fiji.

The Department for Women has been allocated $3.91 million as it leads the implementation of two key national frameworks: the Women's Economic Empowerment National Action Plan, launched in 2025, and the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against all Women and Girls, launched in 2023. The National Action Plan is to prevent violence against all women and girls places a strong emphasis on primary prevention through evidence-based approaches, strengthening the legislative and policy framework, and improved coordinated responses across social services, the Women's Domestic Violence Helpline, and the Fiji Police Force.

This week, we will launch updated service delivery protocols to strengthen the quality and consistency of support provided to survivors, while continuing to build the capacity of government institutions to respond effectively to gender-based violence. Through this Budget, Government continues to fund the Women's Domestic Violence Helpline 1560 and has also allocated funding to support a women's shelter in the Western Division, ensuring greater access to protection and support services.

Mr. Speaker, this Budget also provides dedicated funding for the implementation of the Women's Economic Empowerment National Action Plan. This investment will expand women's access to economic opportunities by supporting skills development, facilitating re-entry into the workforce, strengthening financial inclusion, and improving access to markets, finance, and grants for women entrepreneurs, particularly those in rural and maritime communities.

The Department for Women is also leading the Gender Transformative Institutional Capacity Development Initiative across 14 government agencies, to strengthen institutional capacity and embed gender equality into government policies, programmes, and budgeting processes, and I thank the New Zealand Government and South Pacific Commission (SPC) for supporting this process.

Importantly, gender equality is no longer confined to one single ministry but integrated across Government planning and budgeting. This Budget reflects additional investments in agriculture, health, youth development and defence, demonstrating a genuine whole-of-government approach to advancing gender equality and ensuring that women and girls can fully participate in, and benefit from Fiji's development.

Poverty reduction remains at the core of the Ministry's mandate. We are finalising the Fiji Poverty Alleviation Strategy Framework 2026–2035, which will provide a coordinated national approach to addressing poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion through stronger partnerships between Government, civil society, development partners, and the private sector.

The Ministry's REACH Programme has received a 60 percent increase in funding, enabling it to expand the delivery of whole-of-government services to Fiji's most remote, rural, and maritime communities. This increased investment will help ensure that we can reach the most underserved.

We also welcome funding for several important new initiatives in this Budget, including, scoping for Fiji's first Men's Helpline, an Emergency Assistance Fund to provide urgent welfare support to individuals and families facing immediate hardship and a Social Cohesion Fund to support reconciliation, family strengthening, and community healing initiatives, fostering more resilient and inclusive communities. These achievements would not have been possible without the steadfast support of our valued development partners, civil society organisations, faith-based organisations and community stakeholders. We sincerely acknowledge the continued contributions of the Governments Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Korea. the World Bank, UN Women, UNFPA, SPC, the Asian Development Bank, and our many other partner collaboration that helps advance Fiji's social development agenda.

We also recognise the invaluable work of organisations supporting women, children, older persons, and persons living with disabilities. Our targeted budget allocations to these organisations, reflect our deep appreciation for their dedication and acknowledge the essential role they play, in delivering critical services to those who need them the most.

Mr. Speaker, this Budget allocation to our Ministry will significantly strengthen our capacity to build resilience, support families, protect children, empower women, care for older persons and persons with disabilities, and advance Fiji's vision of sustainable, inclusive, and people-centred development. Despite the ongoing global economic and financial challenges, this Government has remained steadfast in its commitment to safeguarding the well-being of the most vulnerable members of our society. Through this budget, we are ensuring that Fiji's social protection system remains strong, responsive and sustainable while maintaining and strengthening the essential safety net for support those who need them the most.

This budget reflects our unwavering commitment to uplifting vulnerable communities, promoting inclusiveness and investing in a more resilient and prosperous future for all Fijians. I would like to thank the Minister for Finance and Business Development and his team for their hard work in preparation of this budget and ensuring the most vulnerable are prioritised. I support this Budget.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, those present in the gallery, those watching live through various digital devices, ladies and gentlemen, *ni sa bula vinaka, namaskar*, and a very good evening to you all.

We on this side of the House advocate for strong accountability and transparency that is crucial to good governance and we, as Members of Parliament, should ensure that the budget represents the needs and goals of all Fijians.

While acknowledging the Minister for Finance's presentation, I describe this as a budget of resides of promises and borrowed time. The Government's claim of prudent fiscal management is questionable, giving rising expenditure, about $17 million drop in revenue and a projected more than $1 billion fiscal deficit. This budget appears more focused on creating positive headlines ahead of the 2026-2027 civic cycle than addressing the deeper structural challenges facing the domestic economy.

For any business to grow and make a profit, the owners need to increase sales and reduce costs. In this budget, Sir, I see the opposite. The revenue is decreasing and the expenses are increasing. If you look at the revenue for the past three years, 2024-2025 Budget, it was $4,053.2 million. 2025-2026 Budget, it went down to $3,824,000,000, and in this budget, it has further gone down to $3,824,000,000. In the past three years, our expenses have been increasing. 2024-2025 Budget, it was $4,390,700,000, 2025-2026 budget, it went up to $4,670,400,000, and in this budget, it has further gone up to $4,869,800,000. Sir, any right-thinking person with some accounting knowledge will tell you we are doing the opposite of what we are supposed to be doing. Sir, by reducing revenue and increasing expenses, our losses are increasing every year.

In 2024-2025 Budget, we incurred a loss of $377.5 million. In 2025-2026 Budget, our deficit was $776.4 million, and this year, it has gone up to $1,045.5 million. Sir, when we incur losses, our debt grows. When the Coalition Government took office, our debt was $9.7 billion. By July of next year, our national debt will be projected to increase to $12.58 billion. Mr. Speaker, Sir, prior to the 2022 General Elections, former finance minister, honourable Prasad, was talking about national debt and this was one of his tactics. He used to manipulate people's emotions, as to swerve votes his way to win the elections. After forming the government, honourable Prasad forgot about the high debt and started borrowing himself.

Sir, I would like to present some national debt figures for the past years. In 2000, our national debt was $1.4 billion. In 2010, it rose to $3.4 billion, and it took 10 years for the national debt to increase by $2 billion. In 2020, it increased to $6.7 billion. It took another 10 years to increase by $3 billion. In 2022, the national debt was $9.7 billion, and it took only four years for the national debt to increase by $3 billion to $12.6 billion. I repeat; it took only four years for this Government to increase the national debt by $3 billion, which is 84.8 percent of the GDP.

Sir, it simply means the current Coalition Government is just borrowing to meet the expenses and thus increasing the national debt. If we continue this path, our national debt will continue to increase, and a time will come when our lenders stop lending us. Where will we go then? Sir, in this budget, $0.82 of every dollar is consumed by re-current costs, meaning salaries, subsidies, transfers rather than invested in infrastructure or long-term productivity. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) and The World Bank often recommend that small economies maintain a capital share of nearly 25 percent to 30 percent to drive future growth.

By this benchmark, Fiji's current path under-invests in assets that expand future Gross Domestic Product (GDP) capacity, such as roads, digital infrastructure, advanced health systems, and resilient water projects. In its April World Economic Outlook, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) now projects global growth to slow down to 3.1 percent this year, down from 3.3 percent projected in January. The downgraded forecast reflects heightened downside risks, including a prolonged Middle East conflict, rising geo-political fragmentation, and a possible renewal of trade tensions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the long-term economic cost of under-investments is stark:

- Productivity stalls: Without consistent capital injections, the economy risks a lower growth ceiling, eroding future tax bases needed to sustain social programmes.
- Higher vulnerability: Infrastructure deficits raise logistic costs. Data investors and exports Fiji more acutely to climate commodities than geopolitical stocks.
- Intergenerational imbalance: Under the Financial Management Act 2004, budgets are obligated to balance the needs of current and future generations. Our heavy-duty operating spending may be short-changing future Fijians.

I urge Parliament to consider these major refinements to strengthen the medium- and long-term growth outlook. Re-balance expenditure mix. Aim progressively for a capital share of at least 25 percent by next year, in line with the National Development Plan's infrastructure ambitions.

Deepen public-private partnerships. Leverage Fiji's new legal and policy frameworks to attract private capital for major roads, water, Information and Communications Technology (ICT), and renewable energy, easing fiscal burdens. Protect priority capital lines. Re-finance strategic infrastructure allocations against the ad hoc cuts to maintain project continuity. Operational efficiency drives. Undertake public service delivery reviews to trim low-impact administrative overheads, redirecting savings into capital projects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, achieving this will require a broader national consensus on the appropriate role and size of government in the economy. Fundamental questions relating to the scope of Government activities, the efficiency of public service delivery, the size of the civil service and the prioritisation of expenditure must be addressed. Meaningful expenditure reform requires political discipline and sustained commitment, as the benefits often materialise over medium to long term, while the adjustment costs are felt more immediately.

It is also critical to observe that the Government's well-intentioned decision to phase out the contract-based system in the civil service is unexpectedly eroded incentives for performance, particularly in critical sectors like health. The civil service now lies in a function under permanent tenure with no direct output for performance linkages, weakening agency and accountability. This trenches complacency precisely where dynamism and rapid responsiveness are most needed, leading to issues such as months-long non-repairs of vital infrastructure and medical equipment.

The economy continues to face several major structural and fiscal challenges; these include -

- persistent costs of living pressures faced by households;
- ongoing skill shortages across key sectors; and
- increasing demand for public investments to support economic and social development.

Additionally, emerging social and public health issues, including the rising incidence of non-communicable diseases and diseases, HIV and drug use, are also placing a strain on labour productivity and public resources.

Another drawback for our economy is that Fiji could be heading into a dry and normal period, with climate exports winning that, and the *El Nino* event is increasingly likely to develop in the coming months. The Fiji Meteorological Service has placed the country under an *El Nino* watch, saying both oceanic and atmospheric conditions are consistent with the climate phenomenon.

According to the latest Fiji Climate Outlook for June to November 2026, most global climate models now favour the development of *El Nino*. If the event develops, Fiji can expect generally drier conditions, particularly during the dry season. The outlook forecasts normal or below-normal rainfall across the Fiji group, including Rotuma, and indicates that temperatures are likely to remain warmer than usual. For now, Fiji remains alert as the festive climate system shows increasing signs of shifting towards an *El Nino* phase.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in Fiji, farmers grow crops, maintain small gardens for cash income, and raise animals for milk, meat and farming. In most cases, the subsistence crops take priority during the generally reliable wet season, however, the 1997-1998 seasonal rainfall failure highlighted the undeniability of weather conditions during an El Nino event. The lack of rainfall during the later months of 1997, which would usually have been the beginning of the wet season, delayed the planting of seasonal crops, and the lack of moisture thereafter extensively damaged or destroyed those crops that had been planted, such as cassava and dalo.

Crops were badly affected and as the food supply from plantations was exhausted, the Government had to make provisions for emergency food rations in many areas in the western division. Rations for drought victims increased from 27,177 households in June 1988 to well over 30,000 households by August of that same year. In total, over 200,000 persons, or approximately one-third of the population of Fiji at that time, needed basic survival food.

Sugarcane, the dominant commercial crop of the dry zone suffered major losses, especially in the areas with much more soil and steeper slopes. In 1997, 347,000 tonnes of sugar were produced, which was the lowest production since 1985. Sugar production in 1998 then fell to around 30,000 tonnes, which was the lowest production since 1985. Sugar production in 1998 fell to around 30,000 tonnes, which is the lowest output ever since. The seriousness of the drought prompted the Government to declare a natural disaster for the affected areas in September 1998.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance was requested to undertake a consultation with the Fiji Government – a comprehensive multi-sector survey to conduct short, medium and long-term drought mitigation strategies and farm rehabilitation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reason I am raising this is, if we come across such a situation, the question we need to ask now is, are we prepared for this? Do we have enough surplus funds to cater for such humanitarian assistance? I do not think so, Sir. I would like to reinforce once again that Fiji's rising public debt, now approaching $13 billion, raises serious concern about long-term fiscal sustainability. While a large portion of the budget is consumed by operational costs, the country must question, whether borrowing is being directed towards productive investments that generate future revenue or merely sustaining Government operations. Furthermore, claims of reducing ministerial expenses through cuts to travel workshops and communications appear insufficient when compared with the growing burden of debt servicing and pressure on Government finances.

Mr. Speaker, before I conclude, I seek your permission to speak in Hindi.

Speaker *Mahoday, koi bhi vyapar fayda karne ke liye zaroori hai ki aamdani badhai jaaye aur kharch kam kiya jaaye.* Budget *ek vyapar ki tarah hai, aur jo mai dekh raha hoon iss* Budget *mein, yaha par agar aap aankada le, hamare paas yaha par kitaab hai, aur iss kitaab ke aakhri panne par, aap dekhenge* 1995 *se* data available *hai. Aap dekh sakte hai svyam, aur ise maine nahi, ise* Ministry of Finance *ne taiyaar kiya hai . Mai kewal pichle teen saalo ki baat karoon. Pichle teen saalo mein hamare kharch badh rahe hai lagataar. Har saal kharch badh rahe hai aur aamdani kam ho rhai hai. Mai ek-ek aakde par nahi jaunga kyuki bahut samay lagega, lekin aap svyam dekh sakte hai ki kharch badh raha hai, aamdani ghat rahi hai aur fal-swaroop hamara jo ghata hai, wo badhta ja raha hai tatha hamara jo karz hai, jo* deficit *hai ye badhta ja raha hai.*

Mai iske baare mein thoda sa bol doon, 2024-2025 National Budget *mei hamara ghata* $337.5 million *tha aur* 2025-2026 National Budget *mei hamara ghata badh kar* $776.4 million *ho gaya hai. Is saal ye badh kar* one billion, 45.5 million dollars *ho gaya hai. Aap dekha sakte hai. Jab ye sarkar satta mein aayi thi* 2022 *mei, us waqt hamara karz* $9.7 billion *tha. Aur us waqt bahut halla ho raha tha, bahut shor mach rahi thi ki bahut zyada karz ho gaya hai aur hamari agli peedhi ko karz bharna padega. Ek vyakti ke upar itna karz hai. Lekin ab, jab ki karz badh kar ke* $12.58 billion *ho gaya hai toh in logo ne chuppi saadh li hai, maun dharan kar li hai aur is baare mein koi kuch nahi bol raha hai.*

Mai kewal bata raha hoon ki aap ye kitaab dekhenge, ki 2000 *se agar hum dekhe hamara karz* $1.4 billion *tha aur* 2010 *mein ye badh kar* $3.4 billion *ho gaya. Matlab ki*, $1.4 billion *se* $3.4 billion *badhne mein dus saal lage. Aur fir* 2020 *mein hamara karz badh kar* $6.7 billion. Matlab ki, $3 billion *badhne ke liye ek aur dus saal lage. Lekin*, 2022 *mein ye* $9.7 billion *tha, ab agle saal iss* budget *mein ye badh kar ke lagbhag* $12.6 billion *ho jayega.*

Kewal chaar saalo mein ye karz $3 billion se badha. Aap dekh rahe hai ki itna zyada isme badhanti hui hai. Iss tarah se jo World Bank hai bol rahe hai ki hamara jo capital investment hai jisse aamdani aaye wo 25 percent se 30 percent ho, lekin yaha par kewal hum dekh rahe hai $100 mei 82 cents kharch hota hai aur kewal 18 cents jo bachta hai wo hum anye kaamo mein laate hai.

[Mr. Speaker Sir, to progress and make profit in any business, it is important that income has to increase while expenditure has to be reduced. Our budget is no exception; it is also like a business. Budget, which deals with a country's income, expenditure and debt is also no less than a business. As I am looking at this Budget, and as you all can see the figures in this budget booklet, one can very clearly see budget data is available from 1995.

This booklet has been printed by the Ministry of Finance. Let me speak on the figures from past three years. Figures in the past three years clearly state that there has been a continuous increase in the expenditure while income generation has declined, which concludes to the deficits.

In 2024-2025 Budget, figures show a deficit of $337.5 million while in 2025-2026 Budget, this has increased to $776.4 million. This year, it has increased to $1.0455 billion ($1,045.5 million). When this Government came into power in 2022, our debt was $9.7 billion. That time, there was a big hue and cry from this Government. They made big noises that the debt accumulated was very huge which might be a burden on the shoulders of the next generation. However, in 2022, the figure was $9.7 billion, while in the coming year, we can see an increase to $12.6 billion.

In only a 4-year term, the debt has increased by $3 billion. We all can see the continuous increase in the country's debt. The World Bank and ADB said that our capital investment has to be in between 25 percent to 30 percent, but the case here is opposite. On every $100, 82 cents are spent and only 18 cents are left for other expenses. What about now? The debt has increased to $12.58 billion. Why there is no hue and cry, why no noise and why is there silence on this situation? Why is no one harping on this situation? If you study this budget book, it is stated that from 2000, the debt was 1.4 billion dollars. In 2010, it had increased to $3.4 billion. In other words, it has increased from $1.4 billion to $3.4 billion. It took 10 years for this increase. In 2020, the debt increased to $6.7 million, which meant that an additional $3 million increase which took another 10 years for this increase.]

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Parliament is entrusted not only to steward relief to our citizen today, but to build a platform for resilience inclusive growth tomorrow. This budget should be the start and not the end of a conversation of how we systematically lift our capital expenditure, drive productivity and honour our intergenerational obligation under the Constitution and the Financial Management Act.

By recalibrating our spending structure even gradually, we secure not just security, stability and prosperity, today but also ensure that tomorrows Fijians inherited an economy stronger than we found it.

May God bless Fiji and its people as we continue to put our people first.

HON. S. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and my fellow Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of the House, ladies and gentlemen, viewers and loved ones watching online from different parts of the world, especially my beloved son and my wife, watching from and supporting from Wellington, New Zealand.

Bula vinaka and *namaste* to you all. Mr. Speaker, allow me to begin my budget address by acknowledging and dedicating this time in my speech to congratulate all ECE students and stakeholders across the country for the successful completion of ECE Week in the last week. I must say thank you for your tireless work in marking ECE Week.

Your creativity and commitment lift our youngest learners and their families. A special thank you to Amazing Grace Kindergarten's Khalsa Road, Sakoca for welcoming me to share treats with the children on special occasions. Your warm hospitality brightens the community and our country's future generation.

I also wish to thank my *Tavale* Adi Vani Rabuakoro for her ongoing personal engagement and dedication to our early childhood sector. Keep inspiring our children, *vinaka vakalevu*, and bring them for a visit to Parliament. *Vinaka*, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to fully support the 2026-2027 National Budget and commend the honourable Minister for Finance, Commerce and Business Development for presenting a budget that is timely, responsible, balanced, pragmatic and people-centred. At the outset, everyone thought that this would be an election budget, containing increments, giveaways and handouts carefully parcelled in the budget to win the election again.

However, I congratulate the honourable Minister for Finance for presenting what we believe is a responsible and forward-looking budget at a time when Fiji, like many nations around the world, continues to face significant economic challenges arising from global fuel market instability, slow economic growth and rising fiscal pressures.

Despite these challenges, this Government has chosen compassion over complacency, responsibility over populism and the long-term national interest over short-term political gain. The Coalition Government has responded decisively by protecting vulnerable families, supporting working people and continuing to invest in Fiji's future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, budgets are often judged by figures and allocations. However, the true measure of any budget lies in the lives it improves, the opportunities it creates and the confidence it gives ordinary citizens that tomorrow will be better than today. This budget does exactly that. It invests not only in economic growth but also in social cohesion, community resilience and the well-being of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome and fully support this Budget because it directly responds to the pressures facing families due to international fuel price volatility. The Government has chosen to absorb transport and electricity shocks for low-income households while retaining targeted relief measures that protect household incomes and access to essential services. This is a practical and responsible approach. It demonstrates that this Government chooses stability-targeted support and sound economic management over short-term populist measures. The Budget carefully restrains operating expenditure while protecting frontline services, social welfare programmes, healthcare and education. This is responsible leadership in uncertain times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Development Plan reminds us that sustainable development must be inclusive, people-centred, and leave no one behind. Economic growth alone cannot build the Fiji we aspire to become. Development must strengthen trust, create opportunities, and empower every citizen to participate fully in our nation's progress. These principles are at the heart of the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs, Culture, and Heritage and Arts. I am pleased that this Budget supports these goals through practical measures that strengthen social cohesion. Firstly, social welfare assistance, pension programmes, and after-care support for approximately 130,000 Fijians have been maintained.

The continued support and increased assistance for senior citizens protects dignity, strengthens family, and promotes intergenerational stability throughout our communities. Secondly, the Budget continues support for community leadership and village institutions through allocations to the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, including assistance for *Turaga ni Koro*, *Mata ni Tikina*, and *Turaga ni Yavusa* together with support to the Village Improvement Scheme and Resource Owners Support Fund. Strong community leadership builds stronger communities. It helps bridge cultural differences and strengthens trust among our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government demonstrated its commitment to national unity when it restored the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs in 2023. It recognised that social cohesion cannot be left to chance. It requires leadership, it requires partnership, and it requires investment. I therefore welcome the allocation of $7.14 million to the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs, Culture, Heritage, and Arts. This funding will enable us to continue strengthening multicultural understanding, preserving cultural heritage, and empowering communities throughout Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also welcome the continued support provided in this budget for the important work of the Ministry in preserving Fiji's rich and cultural heritage. This includes continued investment towards Girmit commemoration ($200,000), Girmit record digitisation project ($500,000), community engagement and community mapping ($100,000), social cohesion and research ($50,000), construction of Shraad Ghaat ($450,000), upgrading and enhancement of crematoriums ($555,000), the preparatory cost of State of Art Museum ($150,000), the purchase of Gas Fired Cremators ($1,060,000).

Mr. Speaker, I am extremely pleased that this Budget has increased support for the Ministry's multi-ethnic grant programme through an allocation of $2 million. This is one of the most practical and impactful programme delivered by the Government because it reaches people directly in their communities. As many members know, the Ministry supports community organisations in Fiji with projects including:

- Community hall;
- Temple, mosque and church fencing;
- Water management system;
- Cohorts,
- Accessibility improvements;

- Musical instruments;
- Educational and learning development programmes;
- Renovation of community facilities;
- Materials for temporary sheds;
- Solar energy projects;
- Cemetery repairs;
- Construction and upgrade of equipment purchases; and
- Many other community initiatives on an as-is and need basis.

I thank the honourable Prime Minister for a stand-alone Ministry for Multi-Ethnic Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts. Mr. Speaker, Sir, since becoming Assistant Minister, I have travelled extensively throughout Fiji, visiting communities that have benefited from these programmes, and I have visited villages, settlements, faith-based organisations and community groups across our divisions. Where I have gone, people have expressed their appreciation to this Government and the honourable Prime Minister for re-establishing the full Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts and providing practical assistance to the grant programmes. A total of 750 projects, a payload of $4.1 million, have already been successfully implemented, rolled out and commissioned from 2023 to 2026.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many have personally asked me to convey their sincere appreciation to the honourable Prime Minister and this Government. They have told me that these grants are helping communities organise themselves, improve their facilities, preserve their culture, restore the dignity of the places of worship and memorial gardens, and work together in ways that were previously difficult. This is a huge support from the Government to grassroots communities, only by the people's Coalition Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, preserving history is not about living in the past, it is about strengthening our future. These are not merely expenditures. They are investments in unity, stability and social harmony. It is about ensuring future generations understand the sacrifices, struggles and achievements that have helped build modern Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also welcome the recent allocations to the Department of Culture, Heritage and Arts, particularly for the implementation of:

- National Culture Policy worth $205,000;
- Rehabilitation of Levuka World Heritage Structure for $1.2 million; and
- The refurbishment of St. Stephen's building for around $200 million.

I also support the community development allocations administered through the Office of the Prime Minister. Continued investment in the Village Improvement Programme, informal settlement upgrading and community infrastructure provide opportunities for people from different backgrounds to work together on shared development priorities. One of Fiji's greatest strengths is our diversity, our cultures, traditions, languages and faiths are not obstacles to development, they are our competitive advantage, whether iTaukei, Girmit descendants, Rotuman, Banaban, Chinese, European or any other community, every group has contributed to the Fiji we proudly call home.

This budget contains critical measures that will benefit ordinary Fijians in their daily lives. Families will continue to benefit from the retention of Value Added Tax (VAT) 12.5 percent and the continued zero rating of many essential food and household items. A reduction in import duty on certain food items, et cetera will help reduce the burden on family budgets and lower the cost of living.

For transport users, the Government has fully absorbed the 22.5 percent bus fare increase, ensuring that approximately 350,000 daily bus passengers, including students and workers, do not pay higher fares. In addition, support for rural and maritime transport services will also improve accessibility for communities in remote areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, water security remains a priority for this Government. Free water for households earning $30,000 or below continues, while investment through the Water Authority of Fiji will help reduce leakage, improve reliability and expand access. The Kinoya Wastewater Upgrade Project will also improve environmental outcomes and public health for growing communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also commend the Government for its significant investment in healthcare. Expansion of primary health services, continued implementation of the PHIT programme and development of a new Cancer and Radiotherapy Centre at the CWM Hospital, will improve access to quality medical treatment and reduce the need for costly overseas referrals.

As a former schoolteacher, education remains very close to my heart. In education, the Government continues to invest in our future generations. The free education grant remains in place, back-to-school assistance continues, scholarships have been expanded, including opportunities in technical, vocational, and health-related fields. These initiatives help reduce household costs while providing pathways to meaningful employment for our young people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget also provides important support to rural livelihoods, through agricultural programmes that include fertiliser assistance, weedicides subsidies, transport support and initiatives designed to improve productivity and strengthen household income.

For many rural and multicultural communities, these programmes are not merely economic support. They are opportunities to strengthen resilience, improve productivity, and create sustainable livelihoods. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also welcome the Government's commitment to strengthening religious and moral enhancement initiatives. Faith-based organisations remain among the strongest institutions within our communities. Working together with churches, temples, mosques and other faith organisations enables Government to address social challenges, strengthen families and promote respect, compassion and national unity. This complements the work already undertaken by the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no budget can satisfy every expectation. Every budget requires choices. What distinguishes this Budget is that those choices have been guided by responsibility, fairness and compassion. Despite significant economic challenges, the Government has chosen to protect the vulnerable, invest in communities, strengthen culture and heritage, promote social cohesion and continue building a stronger Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on behalf of the people whom I have the privilege to serve, I commend the honourable Minister for Finance and the entire Team Finance for presenting a budget that balances fiscal responsibility with compassion, supports families through difficult economic times and continues investing in culture and the future of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to conclude with this thought. A nation's greatest wealth is not measured solely by its GDP. It is measured by the strength of its communities. The trust its people have for one another, the respect they show for each other's culture and the opportunities they create for future generations. This budget invests in those things. It invests in communities. It invests in inclusion. It invests in resilience. It invests in culture and heritage, most importantly, it invests in people.

I congratulate the honourable Prime Minister and the Coalition Government for presenting a balanced and responsible budget that protects the vulnerable, supports working families, strengthens communities and continues investing in Fiji's future.

The Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts, stands fully committed to implementing these initiatives at the grassroots level, so that every Fijian, regardless of ethnicity, religion and background, shares in the opportunities created by this Budget. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a responsible, people-centred budget. It protects the vulnerable, invests in our future and strengthens the social fabric that binds our multi-ethnic community together.

Mr. Speaker, allow me to share these views in the dialect.

"*Ni bula tale na veiwekani taucoko sara o ni sarava tiko mai na retio yaloyalo ena siga ni kua. Au vakavinavinakataka na Turaga, ni soli tu vei keda nai cegu ni bula rawa meda qarava na duidui ni tavi kacivi keda kina na Turaga levu ko Jiova. Na tabana ni Multi-Ethnic Affairs au veiqaravi kina, e solia tu e levu na veivuke. Ni bau mai va kena vale ni volavola, ka mai taro vakasala e keya. Ni vakadikevi vakalekaleka nai vola, era tukuna na 2026-2027 National Budget e dua na Budget dina. Ka warai ni caka tu no baleta ni sa voleka mai na veidigidigi. Na Budget e caka qoi e baleti keda taucoko sara na lewei Viti, ka tou vukei raraba, wili kea o ira na gone lailai vata kei ira na qase sara. Na vakayagataki ni i lavo, mo ni vakayalomatuatake, na kena vakayagataki. Au kerei keda na lewe ni vanua, tou veitauriliga, tou cakacaka vata, baleta na nodatou matanitu sa ma yaco tiko mai nodatou veivuke. Dou toso mai, me tou mai vodo vata kece no, va na waqa bilibili. O keitou qoi, toso Viti."*

I, therefore, commend the 2026-2027 National Budget to this august House and give my full support. *Nakwa. Vinaka vakalevu, dhanyavad*, thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we have five more speakers on our Batting list and amongst them is the honourable Minister for Health who would, I am sure, be recommending that we eat at the right time. Honourable Members, at this point, we will suspend our proceedings for dinner. Parliament will resume in an hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.46 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 7.50 p.m.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; a very good evening.

I rise to make my contribution to the budget estimates presented to Parliament by the honourable Minister for Finance on 26 June. Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to firstly thank the Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Finance, Mr. Shiri Gounder, and his team for assisting the honourable Minister for Finance in preparing the 2026-2027 National Budget.

I have noted in the Budget the continuation of free education, bus fare subsidies, and back-to-school assistance as positive steps that will bring some relief to struggling families. These are important, and I take great credit for where its due. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a loyal member of the Opposition and a representative of my people, I intend to highlight some issues related to the policy measures announced to this House on 26 June.

The primary objective of the Government Budget is to create a comprehensive financial plan that supports economic growth and the well-being of all citizens while ensuring efficient and transparent use of public funds. It is rather unfortunate that the Coalition Government's 2027 Budget offers very little innovative measures to address the high cost of living for ordinary Fijians who are being pushed into poverty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since the Budget announcement, I have engaged countless Fijians from all walks of life. The overwhelming sentiment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is one of deep disappointment and profound concern, particularly regarding high food cost, reduction in the compulsory FNPF employer contribution from 10 percent to 8 percent, skills crisis, brain drain and minimum wage. They universally echo the sentiment that this Budget lacks vision, proper planning, and tragically, they fear it will inflict further hardship on our children in the years to come. Mr. Speaker, Sir, VAT, according to Fijians, the 15 percent VAT imposed in 2023 has done irreparable damage in the last three years and had a great impact on Fijians' livelihoods.

The Coalition Government's decision to initially raise VAT to 15 percent in its first Budget was not well thought out, which triggered the cost-of-living crisis. The Coalition Government's decision to increase VAT in 2023 was a poorly calculated move, which directly affected the bread-and-butter issues of the Fijians and made it difficult to make ends meet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget punishes workers. The Coalition Government has announced a reduction in the compulsory FNPF employer contribution from 10 percent to 8 percent effective 1st August. Employers will contribute 8 percent, meaning less money will be going to workers' retirement savings. This decision will directly affect workers, including teachers and other civil servants.

The 2 percent reduction in employer FNPF contribution is totally unjustified. It will reduce workers' retirement savings at a time when many families are already struggling financially. The Budget proves beyond doubt that the parties in the Coalition Government have no feelings for the workers. This shows that the Coalition Government lacks strategic ideas and does not care about poor workers. This smart move by Coalition Government effectively amounts to 2 percent pay cut for 42,000 civil servants and thousands of workers.

Minimum Wage — The Coalition Government's decision to review the minimum wage rather than increase it, delayed much-needed relief for low-income earners. The minimum wage has remained at $5 an hour since April last year while the cost of food and other household essentials continue to rise. Workers on the current minimum wage of $5 per hour have also received no additional support in this Budget. Instead of measures to improve their financial situations, they will see reduced employer contributions to their long-term savings. There is no increase in the national minimum wage despite ongoing financial pressures faced by many households. There will be further consultations on the minimum wage next year. Workers need immediate relief rather than more discussions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no pay rise for civil servants, including teachers. The honourable Minister for Finance confirmed in his Budget Address that there will be no pay rise for our civil servants. The salary increase for the Civil Service was eagerly anticipated by civil servants. Many civil servants, including teachers, had hoped for salary increases to help them cope with the rising cost of living. Instead, the reduction in employer FNPF contributions effectively means less is being invested in their retirement savings.

The unions were lobbying for a 15 percent to 20 percent pay increase. According to many civil servants, the 3 percent pay increase given last year, is inadequate against the ever-increasing cost of living and with escalating inflation over the last three years. Many were thinking that there would be some relief in this Budget for them, but sadly, it is not there. All workers, including teachers and other civil servants, deserve meaningful recognition for the vital role they play in building our nation. Policies should strengthen their financial security, not weaken it.

The Coalition Government's poor decision will be very costly. This decision has eroded public trust and will compel many of our brightest and most productive citizens to seek greener pastures abroad. Mr. Speaker, Sir, brain drain and no pay increase for civil servants will have a trickle-down effect. Brain drain will continue, and we can expect a severe skill crisis in all sectors. There is already a shortage of qualified teachers, and no pay increase will worsen the situation. The shortage of qualified teachers in primary and secondary schools is directly impacting education quality and student outcomes. We are losing teachers, nurses, engineers and many more. There is no plan to stop the brain drain.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the brain drain is stating a cycle where low pay leads to low retention, which results in lower quality education and further erosion of the profession's standing. We are basically training our best people for Australia and New Zealand. Government should provide incentives to retain skilled workers in Fiji and show that staying in Fiji is worth it. Without addressing economic incentives, efforts to recruit and retain teachers and skilled workers could fail.

Skill Crisis in Fiji — Fiji is facing a growing skill crisis. Employers across construction, tourism, manufacturing, transport, agriculture and essential services consistently report shortages of skilled tradespeople. At the same time, many university graduates struggle to find employment in their chosen fields. This mismatch demonstrates that our education system is no longer fully aligned with the needs of our economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji does not have an education crisis, it has a skills alignment crisis. Our nation needs both, strong universities and a world-class TVET sector. By investing strategically in professional education and strengthening partnerships between education providers and industry, Fiji can build a workforce that is capable of supporting sustainable economic growth, reducing youth unemployment, and improving national productivity. The time has come to treat TVET not as a second option, but as a cornerstone of Fiji's future development. A nation is built not only by its professionals, but also by skilled hands that construct its homes, maintain its infrastructure, empower its industries and keep its economy moving.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need action by the Coalition Government. What is the government doing about this skill crisis? It is heartbreaking to see our best people leave the country. Fiji's economy cannot continue to rely on importing skills while exporting many of its own trained workers overseas. Fijians will seek work where the salaries and wages are better aligned to living costs, as every Fijian has the responsibility to look after his or her own interest first, as no one else will.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if civil servants have better opportunities overseas, where the pay and conditions of work are better, they will go for it. Nation building is very important, however, the nation should also ensure that Government looks after our civil servants in their employment. Pay civil servants what they are worth, and there will not be a skill or labour crisis in Fiji. A great budget does one simple thing: it makes people want to stay in the country. The demoralised teaching workforce and civil service are due to inadequate pay.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in regard to the Back to School support, the continuation of the $200 Back to School support for our children from families with household income of less than $50,000 is a welcome measure, however, I was hoping for an increase to offset the rise in the cost of living. This year, many students received their Back to School assistance very late in the term. I hope Ministry of Education will come up with better strategies so that parents and students are not sent from one office to another while trying to resolve missing payments, creating frustration and hardship.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. H. CHAND.- While back-to-school support is beneficial, the Government must present comprehensive and innovative strategies to fix escalating problems like school dropouts, increasing influence of illicit drugs, substance abuse and sexual assaults and abuse among our youth.

Fiji is faced with a growing crisis with thousands of students affected. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government must give this crisis the priority it demands and implement robust solutions that protect our students and secure their future. Government should come up with innovative initiatives. Children are the world's most valuable resource and our nation's best hope for the future. They are the future of our country, and we must ensure all of them are educated and do not want to see a tragic increase in youth on our streets, vulnerable to crime.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, $64 million has been allocated for a free education grant for more than 225,000 students. The Free Education Grant formula was last revised before VAT was introduced in 2023; however, free education grant to schools remains unchanged. Our small schools, particularly those in the rural, remote, and outer island communities are struggling immensely to provide students with modern teaching and learning resources in a conducive learning environment, precisely because they receive significantly less grant money.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, not increasing the Free Education Grant means this Government is shifting the financial burden onto students and parents. This will burden parents and guardians with school levies and fundraising activities. Students and parents should be involved in fundraising activities at the expense of crucial teaching and learning hours. Who will monitor this fundraising? Monitoring is already a significant issue for the Ministry of Education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the very reasons the Free Education Grant was introduced in 2014 was precisely to move away from levies and fundraising and re-focus on teaching and learning. The Free Education Grant was the cornerstone initiative aimed at elevating financial burdens associated with levies and fundraising. Now, we are going back to where we were two decades ago. This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the real change this Government is delivering.

Welfare of students and teachers: In the 2026-2027 National Budget, the Ministry of Education has been allocated the largest share of funding, amounting to $708.3 million. Given this significant allocation, I urge the Ministry of Education to address the following issues without further delay:

(1) Timely release of Free Education Grant. The Free Education Grant was not released on time last year and have again been delayed this year. These delays have had a significant impact on teaching and learning in our schools. Furthermore, some special schools are still waiting to receive their Term 1 Special Education Grant. This situation must be urgently addressed.

(2) Timely payment of Location Allowances. Teachers serving in remote and maritime areas should receive their Location Allowances on time. Many teachers have repeatedly raised concerns about the lengthy delays in receiving these payments. They deserve to be compensated promptly for the challenges associated with serving in these locations.

(3) Prompt payment of Acting Allowances. Teachers who are appointed to act in higher positions should receive their acting allowances without unnecessary delay. Last year, many teachers expressed frustration over late payments. This is unacceptable and requires immediate attention.

(4) Timely payment of salaries for new teachers. Newly appointed teachers should not have to wait months to receive their salaries. Many teachers have reported to schools beginning of Term 1 this year and they received their first pay in Term 2. Teachers play a vital role in shaping the future of our nation and they should not be burdened by avoidable administrative delays while carrying out their professional responsibilities. I ask the Ministry of Education to explain what is causing these delays, and more importantly, what measures are being taken to ensure that teachers receive their salaries and allowances on time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji’s 2026-2027 National Budget is a short-sighted, debt-heavy, and dangerously out of touch plan, tragically ignoring the country's most pressing and fundamental problems. From the alarming rise in shortage of qualified teachers, to severe skills gap crisis, from poor road conditions, to irregular bus services in rural areas, this budget offers no real substantive solution. Instead, we are presented with temporary handouts and the dangerous addiction to more borrowing.

I call on the Coalition Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to stop feeding us empty slogans and start delivering genuine, long-term solutions for the people of Fiji. This budget is all noise, no substance. It superficially addresses short-term relief but fails to address the deep cracks and systemic failures that have emerged and worsened in Fiji's economy and society over the last three and a half years under this Coalition Government. Therefore, I do not support this Budget.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I respond to the Budget, I thought to quickly respond to some of the queries coming from the Opposition regarding the Budget. It seems, Sir, that they do not understand the financial management of a budget. This budget is a crisis. It was planned, designed and prepared during a crisis. They do not understand the characteristics that needs to go with budgets that are developed during crisis. Sir, the major goal for a budget designed in a crisis are two things – one is to stabilise the economy and the second one is, sustainability; that is it.

You might put a lot of figures, but I really appreciate the honourable Minister for Finance. He has done a very good job. If you can recall, the Ministry of Agriculture, a very important sector got an increase of 8 percent because this is the backbone of the economy of the country. He has the done the right job. The Ministry of Forestry and Fisheries and our local resources also got an increase because these are the money that are going to circulate within our economy. If I have to talk the whole night explaining to them what a crisis is, they will still not understand because they do not have the capacity to understand financial management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today in support of the 2026-2027 National Budget and commend the honourable Prime Minister and honourable Minister for Finance for delivering a thoughtful, responsible and forward-looking budget. At a time when Fiji, like many other countries, continues to face significant challenges arising from the global economy and uncertainty, external shocks, rising costs, fuel and market volatility and the increasing impacts of climate change, this Budget demonstrates prudent leadership and sound economic management. It carefully balances fiscal responsibility with the need to support household businesses and vulnerable communities while continuing to invest in the productive sectors that drive growth, resilience and job creation.

I also wish to commend the honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Sugar Industry for a budget that does not merely speak of figures and allocations, but of a vision that is rooted in the soil of our nation and the aspirations of our people. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a budget that is firmly focused on delivery. It is a budget that understands that economic growth is meaningless unless it translates to a better life for a family in the highlands of Navosa and the youths in the Delta of Rewa and the sugarcane farmers in the burning sun of Labasa. Agriculture has always been and will always be the heartbeat of Fiji's economy. It is the greatest provider of employment, food security and engine for export earnings, but beyond economics, agriculture is a way of life. This Budget recognises that when our farmers prosper, Fiji prospers.

The environment of progress: As rightfully stated by the honourable Minister for Agriculture, before we look ahead to the new financial year, we must acknowledge the ground that we have already gained in the Ministry of Agriculture, Waterways and Sugar Industry in the 2025-2026 financial year. That was not just a year of spending, it was a year of measurable outcomes. Under this Government's leadership, domestic production of nutritious vegetables grew by 12 percent. We are eating what we grow, and we are growing what is healthy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have seen rice imports decline, and wheat imports - a staple we have long relied on from abroad, have fallen by a staggering 30.7 percent. This is not just a statistic, it is a declaration of progress in work on independence for the Fijian food system. We have reached into the backyards of 5,523 households, encouraging home gardening and backyard farming. We are not just supporting large-scale plantations, we are ensuring that every Fijian family has the tools to put fresh, nutritious and healthy food on their own table while saving money in their pockets.

Building the infrastructure of hope, Mr. Speaker, Sir, productivity requires more than just hard work, it requires the right environment. In this financial year alone, this Government completed 149 drainage and irrigation projects and developed and upgraded over 61 kilometres of farm access roads.

An inclusive future for women and youth, Mr. Speaker, Sir, agriculture must be inclusive if it is to be sustainable. For too long, the face of farming was seen through a narrow lens. Today, that is changing. I am inspired by the 508 women who benefitted from livestock development, and the 59 women who received specialised training this past year. At the Women in Agriculture Symposium, we did not just talk about empowerment, we connected 13 women-led enterprises directly to local markets.

To the young people, this Government hears you. With over 500 youth participating in our agriculture programmes, we are proving that the farm is not a place of "last resort". It is a place of innovation, entrepreneurship, and a viable pathway to prosperity. We are making farming "cool again", because we are making it profitable.

From subsistence to success, the power of mechanisation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, perhaps the most transformative story of this past year is our Farm Mechanisation Programme. Since we revitalised this programme in 2022, we have moved away from the age-old struggle of manual labour towards the efficiency of the modern age. We have provided tractors, excavators, and harvesters to the 140 farmers and co-operatives. The results are nothing short of miraculous. Cultivated land among participants has jumped from 1,045 acres to over 2,500 acres. Sales volumes are up by 68 percent, but here is the number that matters most - average farm household income rose from $11,560 to over $16,700 per year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a 56 percent increase in income. This is what delivery looks like. This is what a government for the people looks like. Resilience in the face of change, we cannot ignore the reality of climate change. It is a shadow that hangs over our fields, but we are not standing idle. In 2025-2026, we implemented climate-smart initiatives in eight communities and executed 75 drainage interventions and coastal protection projects. We are building a sector that is not just productive, but resilient. We are ensuring that when the storms come, our farmers have the water storage, the irrigation and the disaster support they need to survive and keep growing.

Building on these achievements, the Government is increasing investment in non-sugar agriculture from $115.3 million to $124.7 million in 2026-2027, representing a growth of 8.2 percent. Overall funding for the Ministry of Agriculture, Waterways and Sugar Industry will increase to $221 million. This reflects the Government's confidence in the sector and its contribution to economic growth, food security, import substitution and rural development.

The 2026-2027 National Budget is strongly focused on commercialisation and productivity growth. Strengthening the front line - crop extension, our farmers are the backbone of this nation, but they cannot stand alone. They need technical expertise, modern systems and consistent support. To this end, the Crop Extension Division receives $33 million – a significant boost of $6.94 million, or nearly 27 percent. This is one of the largest increases in the Ministry's history. We are allocating $400,000 specifically to strengthen extension services, ensuring our staff are equipped to support farmers nationwide in climate adaptation and disaster preparedness.

Investing in export engines: commodity development, our strategy is to back winners. We are focussing on commodities with high global demand and local impact and these are:

(1) *Yaqona* with an allocation of $2 million. We aim to generate $28.3 million in value with surging demand from Australia and New Zealand. We are providing the nurseries and drying facilities needed to turn our green gold into a global household name.

(2) *Dalo* and ginger, we have allocated $1 million and $900,000 respectively to these staples. This is not just about food on the table; it is about 1,600 metric tonnes of produce destined for international markets.

(3) Niche exports, we are also diversifying into high-value products like cocoa, coffee, turmeric and vanilla. These are the niche gems that will provide sustainable incomes for our rural and maritime commodities.

Infrastructure: the bridge to the market, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a farmer's hard work is wasted if the produce cannot reach the market. The Ministry has allocated $4 million for farm access roads – a massive increase that will see 52 kilometres of new roads and 159 kilometres of maintenance. The Ministry is also investing in flatland and highland development to bring thousands of hectares of underutilised land into productive use. This is an example of paving the way for rural economic development.

The mechanisation revolution, the most transformative part of this budget is our $5 million investment in the Farm Mechanisation and Modernisation Programme. For too long, our farmers have been limited by the physical constraints of manual labour. Since we revitalised this programme in 2022, we have assisted 140 farmers and co-operatives with 70 pieces of heavy machinery, including tractors and harvesters. The results are not just encouraging, they are revolutionary.

Our impact assessments cultivated land among beneficiaries has more than doubled, agricultural sales volumes have jumped by 68 percent and, most importantly, average farm household income per harvest has risen from $11,560 to over $16,700.

We have reduced the waiting time for machinery from two months to two days. This is what an efficient Government looks like, this is what empowerment looks like.

A strategic vision: the four-phase pathway:

- Phase One: expanding acreage and productivity;
- Phase Two: forming clusters and cooperatives to ensure machines are used at peak efficiency;
- Phase Three: investing in pack houses, mills, and cold storage to ensure our farmers capture more of the final sale price; and
- Phase Four: providing the certification and quality assurance needed to compete on the world stage.

This is a seed-to-shell strategy. To produce this, we have tripled fertiliser and weedicide subsidy to $3 million, directly lowering production costs for 500 of our most productive farms.

Inclusive growth: leaving no one behind, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a nation's budget must reflect its heart. We are allocating $350,000 for women in agriculture and $200,000 for home gardening initiatives. We are also providing $300,000 for the Rotuman Farming Programme, ensuring that our brothers and sisters in the maritime islands are central to our organic and food security goals. Furthermore, we are investing $500,000 in Small Farm Machinery – power tillers and pumps, specifically targeted at youth and women who are the future of this industry.

The Crop Research Division: Engineering Export Excellence, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Crop Research Division is the scientific heartbeat of our agricultural sector. It has been allocated $13.18 million, while some may note a slight overall reduction of 3 percent. I want to be clear; this is a strategic re-direction. We are moving away from passive maintenance and toward high-impact research priorities that yield tangible returns.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I still have a lot but I will cut it short now. That just goes to show the number of programmes that the Ministry of Agriculture is providing to help agriculture development for farmers. I beg the farmers who are listening today, everyone who is sitting here, tell them to visit their nearby agriculture office and find out how they can be assisted. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I therefore fully support the 2026-2027 National Budget and commend it to the honourable House.

HON. J. N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today on behalf of the Opposition benchers and indeed on behalf of the silent majority of Fijians to deliver my response to the 2026–2027 National Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what has been presented to this august House by this Government is not a blueprint for economic resilience nor is it a strategic road map for national development. The document is built entirely on fiscal stagecraft, a desperate exercise in political survival disguised as economic stewardship. We are witnesses to a dangerous illusion, a budget that attempts to patch over deep structural fractures with superficial, short terms concessions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the administration expects the people of Fiji to applaud a narrative of relief, yet the underlining ledger reveals a terrifying reality of systemic bloat, escalating liabilities, and complete economic stagnation.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget exposes an insatiable, bloated administrative machinery that is actively consuming the future wealth of our nation. The Government's liquidity requirement that has expanded to an astronomical scale, burning through a massive $9 million every single day, just to keep the government machinery working. Consider the gravity of the figure, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Before, a single dollar is spent on upgrading a rural dispensary, before a single cent is allocated to sealing a collapsing road, the state must find $9 million every 24 hours just to sustain its own overload. This is the tragic hallmark of the administration, that prioritises itself over genuine national development. They have constructed top-heavy apparatus that drains the liquidity of the financial system, leaving our economy fragile, over-leveraged, and utterly unequipped to handle the macroeconomic storms that are gathering over the horizon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our people are being challenged daily at the supermarket shelves and fuel pumps, driven by imported fuel costs and severe food-price volatility, that the state has failed to mitigate. The administration stands idly by, attributing these failures entirely to the global headwinds, while offering no domestic buffers to shield our population. The direct consequences of inflationary skills is a devastating, widespread consumption, slowdown across the domestic economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the citizens of Fiji have run out of disposable income, their purchasing power has been completely eroded by the government's previous fiscal missteps. Look at the commercial indicators, Mr. Speaker, Sir, retail sales expansion projections for 2026 have collapsed to a mere 2 percent, a shocking comedown from the robust 6.8 percent growth that businesses were originally anticipating back in August 2025. Shops are empty, inventories are piling up, and small to medium enterprises are struggling to keep their doors open.

The transactional velocity of our economy is increasing because ordinary citizens are forced to choose between buying basic items or paying for essential utilities. This is a true state of the nation in 2026, a stagnant economy trapped in a downward spiral of high cost and low growth, engineered by the very policies originating from the government benches. The total public expenditure proposed for the 2026-2027 fiscal year stands at a massive $4.87 billion. When you pull back the glossy cover of the Budget Estimate book, you uncover a profound, deeply alarming, structural imbalance that comprises our national sovereignty. Over 80 percent of the total spending amount to nearly $4 billion, is entirely locked up in operational expenditure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let that sink into the consciousness of this House. Nearly $4 billion is dedicated to recurrent costs of consumables, travel, and administrative overheads, leaving a pitiful, minor fraction of the entire budget for capital infrastructure development. We are borrowing billions not to build assets for tomorrow, but to pay for the consumption of today.

The fixed commitments detailed in this budget are suffocating the state's financial manoeuvrability. Civil servants' wages, salaries, and operating support costs have ballooned to command $2.3 billion, consuming nearly 50 percent of the entire national budget.

While we fully support the hardworking public servants, we cannot ignore the lack of efficiency and unchecked growth. Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the same time, our legacy of reckless borrowing has caught up with us. Debt servicing now strips away an astonishing $600 million annually just to pay down the interest on our national debt. The $600 million does not reduce the principal amount we owe, it is simply the annual penalty for past profligacy, vanishing into the vaults of international and domestic creditors.

Think of the hospitals that could be built, the water systems that could be overhauled, and the schools that could be modernised with $600 million a year. Instead, this administration has trapped Fiji in a fiscal straitjacket. We are borrowing money to pay for interest on money we previously borrowed. This is an unsustainable, highly irresponsible path that compromises the economic security of our children.

The State has depleted its fiscal space, leaving our nation entirely exposed to any sudden external shock or domestic crisis. By prioritising immediate political survival over long-term structural reform, this budget guarantees that Fiji will remain shackled to high debt and decaying public infrastructure for years to come.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must expose one of the most concerning, hidden dimensions of this budget, the Tourism Tax Bailout. The administration has proudly announced the introduction of a temporary 12-month 5 percentTourism Service Tax, effective 1st September, 2026, targeting licenced hotels, tour operators, and cruise companies with annual revenue exceeding $2 million.

On the surface, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the government frames this as a progressive mechanism to ensure that our premium industry contributes its fair share to the national coffers. Let us look past rhetoric and expose the dark reality behind this policy. This tax was expected to generate $70 million, and every single cent of that $70 million is strictly ring-fenced to insulate a single corporate entity, Fiji Airways, from high aviation fuel cost. This targeted subsidy runs alongside a massive high risky $200 million Government debt guarantee for the national carrier.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are operating in a highly volatile global travel market where visitor arrivals to Fiji are already cooling, driven by aggressive monetary tightening and high cost of living pressures in our core source markets, particularly Australia. Tourism operators have explicitly stated that they cannot pass this new 5 percent tax onto international travellers without destroying Fiji's price competitiveness against competing destinations, like Bali or Thailand.

Consequently, our local resorts, excursion providers and hospitality businesses are being forced to absorb this cost directly into their diminishing margins, threatening local employment and suppressing domestic reinvestment. Why should the broader tourism ecosystem, which sustains thousands of grassroot Fijian families be financially penalised to underwrite the operational risk of a single company? By extending a $200 million guarantee, alongside a ring-fenced $70 million subsidy, the Government is placing an enormous concentration of risk on to the shoulders of every Fijian taxpayer.

If global aviation fuel prices experience another sudden shock or if international passenger volumes drop further in the latter half of 2026, the fiscal fallout will not be contained within the airline. It will trigger a direct liability in the national budget, further depleting our national public reserves. This is not a strategic economic planning, it is a desperate, high-stakes corporate bailout, masquerading an industry tax policy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an economy is not merely a collection of numbers and spreadsheets. It is a living ecosystem powered by human capability, intellect and ambition. The most devastating indictment of this administration performance is the unprecedented crisis of capital flight and human capital depletion that is currently tearing the fabric of our society.

The total collapse of domestic opportunity, combined with punitive cost of living and stagnant wages has triggered a historic mass exodus of our finest minds. Over 114,000 of our citizens have packed their bags and left our shores in recent years seeking stability, fair compensation and predictable future overseas. Look around our institutions, look at our communities and you will see the empty spaces left behind. We are not just losing enormous labour, we are witnessing the systemic drain of our highly skilled professional class.

Our healthcare system is in a state of chronic collapse because senior doctors and specialised nurses are leaving *en masse* for regional neighbours. Our schools are losing veteran educators, leaving our children to be taught by under-trained substitutes. Our construction, engineering and architectural sectors are paralysed by the lack of senior project managers.

Crucially, this very sector that represents the future of Fiji's digital economy, our professional coders, system analysts, accounting experts and technical innovators are abandoning the domestic market. They see an administration that taxes production, rewards bureaucratic compliance and fails to invest in the basic infrastructure required to sustain a modern, knowledge-based economy. This bleeding of our nation's talent is an inevitable result of the Government that puts bureaucracy first, while leaving other creators behind.

We need a new approach to governance. We need a new government that has a plan, a government that understands to build a modern economy and we must put people first. Putting people first means shifting our entire focus towards keeping our workers, driving actual capital development, investing heavily in comprehensive team training and rigorously testing our systems before they fail our systems.

That is the plan Fiji desperately needs and that is the commitment we make to this nation. Relying on remittances mean the Government has accepted defeat, admitting that it cannot create a functional domestic economy, where our own sons and daughters can live, work and thrive. This budget offers no incentive to retain talent, no tax relief for younger professionals and no meaningful support for local innovation. It completely ignores the fact that we are bleeding the very vital human effort required to rebuild our economy and our country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the real economy is found at the market stalls where families are forced to make hard breaking choices every single weekend. The basic price of food items, local produce, root crops and essential groceries have detached completely from the standard wages of the working class. This budget does nothing to bridge this widening social divide. It offers no structural price controls, no meaningful agricultural subsidies to boost local food production and no targeted relief for most of the vulnerable segments of the population.

Let us finally address the fiscal reality of Fiji in 2026; a reality defined by broken promises and decaying public infrastructure. No amount of creating accounting can hide the fiscal ruins of our national asssets. Look at the state of our roads, which has become a national embarrassment and a direct tax on the ordinary people, consider the Nabouwalu access road in Bua. The vital artery that was once completed, tarsealed, providing a smooth, safe and efficient connection for citizens seeking urgent medical care. Under the neglect of this administration, that road has been allowed to degrade entirely back to a rough, destructive, gravel track.

Patients, pregnant mothers and elderly are forced to endure those journeys over potholes just to reach the hospital. This is visible, shameful, symbol of development moving backwards. Look at the critical transport corridors of our main islands. Last year, a severe washout and bridge collapse occurred near Semo Village on the Queens Highway. How did the administration respond? They plunged the nation into months of economic paralysis, forcing our logistic sector, tourists and visitors to rely entirely on slow, hazardous temporary bypass route. Under this administration, months have passed by with nothing but excuses, traffic çones and delays. Let us construct an economic competence to understand the modern world.

Other developing countries in our nation, for which such a vital bridge remains in use. This infrastructure paralysis is visible right across the country. In Tailevu, 12 bridge infrastructures was completely abandoned for over four years. For 48 months, communities have been cut off, farmers have struggled to get their produce to the market, and school buses have been forced to take lengthy and extensive detours, all because the Government cannot manage a basic civil engineering contract. With this road, our most preciousasset, our children, are left behind. Despite years of aggressive tax collection and swelling national expenditure, we still have students in rural and maritime communities who are forced to learn inside temporary tents, exposed to heat, wind, and the rain.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the path crossing and abandoned bridge works, we see across our islands are the physical elements of the administration, without a plan for execution. A competent Government does not just throw the money away and walks away. A government that puts people first, ensures that every single capital project is backed by the right equipment, and the right development standards continues to our local technical teams and absolute mandate to test everything thoroughly before it is deployed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot keep running this country on guesswork and political survival. The time has come for a new Government with a clear strategic plan to rebuild the foundations of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition benchers utterly reject this Budget and we call on the people to demand accountability on this profound betrayal of our nation's potential.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament, I rise today in full support of the 2026 – 2027 National Budget and in particular, the allocation provided to the Ministry of Health and Medical Services.

At the outset, I congratulate the Minister for Finance, Commerce and Business Development for presenting a budget that reflects both prudent fiscal management and a strong commitment to improving the wellbeing of the people of Fiji. The theme of this year’s budget, “A Reasonable Budget for Sustainable Future” recognises the realities of today’s global and domestic economic environment while reaffirming Government’s commitment to protecting essential public services and investing in Fiji’s long-term prosperity.

For the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, however, a budget is measured by much more than financial allocations. It is measured by the lives it protects, the illnesses it prevents, the confidence it gives to families seeking care, and the reassurance it provides that quality healthcare will be available whenever it is needed. That, Mr. Speaker Sir, is the true measure of this budget.

Health is not simply another government service. It is the foundation upon which national development is built. Without a healthy population, our ambitions for economic growth, education, tourism, agriculture, and national prosperity cannot be realised. A healthy child learns better. A healthy worker is more productive. A healthy mother strengthens her family. Healthy communities create a stronger economy. Investment in health is therefore not merely expenditure. It is one of the most important investments any government can make.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in responding to today's challenges around the world, health systems continue to face significant pressures. Health costs continue to rise. Technology continues to advance. Speciality services are increasingly demanded. Populations are ageing. Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) remain prevalent. New infectious diseases continue to emerge. Fiji faces those same realities. Every day our hospitals, health centres and nursing stations respond to growing demand for emergency care, surgery, maternal and child health, mental health services, rehabilitation, communicable diseases and chronic illnesses. These challenges require careful planning, responsible leadership and sustained investment.

Government has made a deliberate choice. Rather than reducing essential services, it has chosen to protect healthcare while maintaining sound financial management. Fiscal discipline does not mean reducing services. It means ensuring every dollar entrusted to Government delivers the greatest benefit to our people. Responsible stewardship and quality healthcare are complementary responsibilities. Strong financial management enables continued investments in hospitals, medicines, infrastructures, technology and our workforce. This budget reflects that commitment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite ongoing fiscal pressures, Government has once again demonstrated that health remains one of its top priorities. The health sector receives a total allocation of $647 million, including $477 million directly for the Ministry of Health and Medical Services. This investment supports our healthcare workforce, funds medicines and vaccines, maintains hospitals, strengthens medical equipment and improves healthcare services throughout the region. Importantly, this budget is not only about maintaining existing services. It is about preparing for Fiji’s health system in the future. Among the major initiatives funded are: the Pacific Healthy Islands Transformation Project, Fiji’s First Radiotherapy and Cancer Treatment Centre, expansion of acute care services at the Colonial War Memorial Hospital, continued upgrading of primary healthcare facilities and digital connectivity for at least 70 primary healthcare facilities. These are transformational investments.

The Pacific Healthy Islands Transformation Project will strengthen primary healthcare through a more integrated people-centred model. Radiotherapy and cancer treatment centre represent a historic milestone, allowing many cancer patients to receive specialised treatment here in Fiji and close to their families. An expansion of acute care services at CWM Hospital will strengthen emergency services and specialist care.

Digital connectivity across primary healthcare facilities will improve communication, referrals, clinical decision-making and the continuity of care. These investments are about much more than infrastructure. They represent hope for patients, confidence for families, stronger support for healthcare professionals and a more resilient health system. Every improvement in procurement increases medicine availability. Every upgraded facility improves patient safety. Every investment in technology strengthens diagnosis and treatment. And every efficiency gain allows more resources to be directed to frontline healthcare. That is the value of responsible investment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before discussing further programmes, I wish to recognise the Ministry's greatest strength. It is our people. Nearly 7,000 health professionals and support staff serve Fiji every day. They work in hospitals, health centres, laboratories, pharmacies, operating theatres, ambulances, public health programmes and administrative offices. Many travel by road, boat or on foot to reach remote maritime communities. Together they form the backbone of Fiji's public health system.

Today, I acknowledge our doctors, nurses, midwives, dentists, pharmacists, laboratory scientists, allied health professionals, community health workers, environmental health officers, ambulance officers, biomedical engineers, administrators, drivers, cleaners, security officers and every member of the Ministry's family. To each of you, I extend Government's sincere appreciation. Thank you for your professionalism. Thank you for your resilience. Thank you for your compassion. Above all, thank you for your unwavering commitment to serving the people of Fiji. Many of you work long hours under difficult conditions, and spend time away from your own families, so that you may take care of others.

Recently, our healthcare workers, emergency response partners, and aviation partners successfully coordinated the emergency evacuation of a critically ill patient from Moce Island. Stories like this rarely make headlines, yet they occur every day throughout Fiji. They remind us that the strength of our health system lies not only in buildings and equipment, but in the dedication of the people who serve within it. This Budget is an investment in those people.

In strengthening primary healthcare, primary healthcare remains the foundation of a strong and sustainable health system. It is where disease is prevented, families receive support, and healthy communities are built. Government will continue to invest in health centres, nursing stations, internal and external health services, school health programmes, immunisation, outreach clinics, and preventive healthcare initiatives. Every day, district medical officers, nurses, community health workers, and multi-disciplinary teams deliver thousands of consultations throughout Fiji. Children continue receiving life-saving immunisations. Mothers receive antenatal and postnatal care. School health teams support the well-being of our students. Community outreach programmes promote healthy lifestyles and early disease detection. These services rarely receive public attention, but they can prevent illness, reduce hospital admissions, and save lives every day.

Providing healthcare across Fiji’s islands presents unique challenges. Many communities are remote and dependent on maritime transport. Yet geography must never determine the quality of healthcare a Fijian receives. Whether someone lives in Suva, Levuka, Kadavu, Rotuma, Gau, Lomaiviti, Vanua Levu or in the interior of Viti Levu, every citizen deserves equitable access to quality healthcare. Healthcare equity is not merely a policy objective; it is a national responsibility. Government, therefore, continues investing in modern infrastructure, staff accommodation, and upgraded facilities across Fiji.

At the same time, significant investment continues in digital transformation. At least 70 primary healthcare facilities will become digitally connected. This will improve patient safety, communication referrals, access to information, and clinical decision-making. Digital health is not simply about computers, it is about delivering safer, faster, and more efficient care. The Pacific Healthy Islands Transformation Project complements these reforms by strengthening prevention, improving service integration, supporting digital transformation, and empowering communities to become active partners in improving their own health.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government does not work alone, and I acknowledge the continued support of our bilateral and multilateral partners, United Nations agencies, regional organisations, our civil society organisations, faith-based organisations, private sector, philanthropic foundations, donors, and visiting medical specialists. Their support for infrastructure, workforce development, specialised medical services, digital health, and emergency response has strengthened healthcare throughout Fiji. Their partnership reflects shared confidence in Fiji's health sector and our common commitment to universal health coverage.

The progress we continue to make is the result of the Government, communities, and development partners working together. By strengthening primary healthcare today, we reduce pressure on hospitals tomorrow. By investing in prevention today, we reduce the cost of these illnesses tomorrow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while primary healthcare is our foundation, every Fijian must also have confidence that specialised care will be available whenever it is needed. This Budget, therefore, continues to strengthen hospitals and specialist services. One of the most significant investments is Fiji's first Radiotherapy and Cancer Treatment Centre. For many years, cancer patients requiring radiotherapy have travelled overseas at great and emotional financial cost. For the first time, many patients will now receive treatment closer to home, and the initial phase of the work will begin within this year.

The Government also continues expanding acute care capacity at Colonial War Memorial Hospital. These investments will improve emergency response, patient flow, specialist services and the quality of care. Funding also continues for diagnostic imaging, biomedical engineering, laboratory medicine, and pharmaceutical services. The Government has increased investment in medicines and medical supplies to strengthen procurement, improve supply chain resilience and maintain reliable access to essential medicines.

The Free Medicine Programme continues ensuring eligible Fijians receive essential medicines without financial hardships. The Ministry also continues reviewing health legislation to strengthen pharmaceutical regulation and patient safety.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no investment in buildings or technologies can succeed without investment in people. The 2026-2027 Budget funds 5,753 established positions, 1,244 government wage earners, supporting a workforce of 6,997 healthcare personnel. Provisions have also been made for recruitment into 312 additional vacant positions.

The Government also continues preparing the next generation of healthcare professionals. This year, 380 graduate nurses and 121 medical graduates are expected to begin internship training, while 327 newly registered nurses will join the Ministry after completing internships. The Budget also supports recruitment of medical officers and continued investment in postgraduate medical education, specialist training, postgraduate midwifery, mental health nursing, and other priority disciplines. Every specialist trained today, strengthens healthcare for thousands of patients tomorrow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government continues strengthening family health services. Maternal and child health, adolescent health, reproductive health and community outreach programmes continue supporting healthier pregnancies, healthier children, and stronger families. Mental health also remains a major priority. As more people seek assistance, the Government continues strengthening workforce capability and community-based mental health services.

One of Fiji's greatest public health challenges remains, HIV. In 2025 alone, Fiji recorded more than 2,000 HIV diagnoses. The Government has responded by strengthening national coordination, expanding prevention programmes, increasing access to testing and treatment, strengthening the workforce, and working closely with development partners and communities. Treatment has become increasingly decentralised, while procurement systems continue improving access to medicines.

Although encouraging progress, HIV continues affecting families and our young people. It is therefore not only a health issue, but also a social, economic and a national development challenge. The investments contained in this Budget strengthens prevention, testing, treatment and workforce capability. Working together, we can reverse the trajectory of this epidemic and protect the future generations of this country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, healthcare is ultimately about the people, and behind every budget allocation is a patient waiting for treatment, a mother preparing to give birth, a child still receiving immunisation, a family hoping for good news, a healthcare worker beginning another long shift. That is why every investment matters, and every Budget reflects Government priorities.

This Budget demonstrates that even during fiscal discipline, Government remains committed to protecting the health and wellbeing of every Fijian. The Ministry fully recognises its responsibility to ensure every dollar entrusted to us, is managed responsibly, transparently, and efficiently. Good governance and accountability remain central to everything that we do.

The progress achieved is not Government's work alone. It reflects the dedication of our healthcare workforce, the trust of the people that we serve and the enduring support of our many partners. Health is not merely an outcome of development. It is an enabler of development. Every investment in health strengthens education, productivity, economic growth, and national resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the true measure of this Budget will not be found solely in the financial estimates before this House. It will be found in the health of children entering our classrooms, it will be found in safer pregnancies and healthy births, it will be found in patients receiving timely treatment close to home, it will be found in stronger communities and it will be found in healthier, more productive resilient communities.

This Budget protects the essential health services our people rely upon today, while laying the foundations for a stronger, more modern, and more resilient health system for tomorrow. It is not simply an investment in the Ministry of Health and Medical Services. It is an investment in every individual family, every community and the future health and security of our nation. For these reasons, I commend the 2026-2027 National Budget to this honourable House.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Nation, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, and my fellow Fijians who are watching from the comfort of their homes. *Bula Vinaka.* A very good evening. *Jay Shree Ram.*

I rise today to contribute to the debate on the 2026-2027 National Budget. At the outset, I wish to acknowledge the work undertaken by the Honourable Minister for Finance and the officials of the Ministry in preparing this budget. The preparation of the National Budget is a significant responsibility, because it determines how our limited resources are prioritised and how Government responds to the needs and aspirations of our people.

However, as members of Parliament, our responsibility does not end with acknowledging the effort involved in presenting the budget. The role of the Opposition is to carefully examine, question and scrutinise the decisions made by the Government on behalf of the people we represent.

A budget is not simply a document of numbers, rather it is a statement of priorities. It reflects the Government's vision, its understanding of national challenges, and its preparedness to protect the people of Fiji, especially those who are most vulnerable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are acknowledging that this Budget contains some positive initiatives and commitments. The Opposition remains concerned that there is a lack of systematic planning and preparedness in several critical areas, particularly rural development and maritime services, climate resilience, and disaster management.

Economic growth figures and revenue projections are important, however, economic growth alone cannot be considered a measurable success if thousands of rural and maritime Fijians continue to struggle with unreliable water supply, poor connectivity, inadequate infrastructure, limited access to government services, and increasing vulnerability to climate change.

A nation cannot move forward when parts of our population are left behind. The reality is that many of our rural communities are not asking for luxury. They are asking for basic services - a reliable road, a functioning jetty, clean water, safe housing, accessible health services and support to sustain their livelihoods. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget must therefore be judged not only by the size of its allocations, but by whether those allocations are sufficient, targeted and capable of producing meaningful outcome for ordinary Fijians.

Let me turn to rural and maritime development. The Budget allocation of approximately $35.4 million, 0.7 percent of total budget, towards rural and maritime development is welcomed. However, the Opposition questions whether this level of investment truly reflects the scale of challenges faced by rural Fiji. Fiji is a nation where thousands of our citizens live in rural areas and maritime islands. These communities face unique geographical challenges, distance, transportation costs, limited infrastructure and exposure to national disasters make service delivery more expensive and more complex. Therefore, rural development cannot be approached as a routine programme. It requires long-term strategic investment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must ask ourselves, is this allocation enough to address the past four years of accumulated infrastructure deficit? Is it enough to repair and upgrade rural access roads? Is it enough to improve jetties and maritime transport facilities? Is it enough to address the housing needs of vulnerable rural families? Is it enough to provide reliable water supply systems in communities that continue to experience shortages? The Opposition believes that the answer is no!

For too long, rural communities have been promised development, but many continue to await. A farmer who cannot transport produce to market because of poor road does not experience economic growth. A family who must walk long distances to collect water does not experience economic prosperity. A maritime community who cannot access reliable transport does not experience equal opportunity. These are not statistics. These are real experiences of our people.

One of the greatest weaknesses in rural development has been the absence of integrated planning. Roads, water, housing, agriculture, education, health and disaster preparedness cannot be planned separately. They are connected. For example, improving rural roads supports agriculture because farmers can transport their produce. Improving water infrastructure supports health and food production. Strengthening maritime transport supports economic participation and access to essential services. Government must move away from isolated projects and adopt a coordinated rural development strategy.

The Opposition also highlighted the continuing challenges faced by outer island communities. Many maritime residents still face difficulties accessing government services because of irregular transport arrangements, high transport costs, and limited emergency response capacity. When cyclone approaches, these communities cannot wait until the last minute for assistance. They require proper planning, storage facilities, communication systems, and reliable transport arrangements before disaster strikes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of rural and maritime Fiji deserve more than announcements. They deserve measurable outcomes. The Government must provide a clear timeline:

(1) How many kilometers of rural roads will be upgraded?

(2) How many communities will receive improved water supply?
(3) How many jetties will be repaired or constructed?
(4) How many vulnerable families will benefit from rural housing programmes?

Without measurable targets, allocations remain simply numbers on paper. A responsible Budget must clearly demonstrate how it will transform the lives of ordinary people.

I now wish to address one of the most serious concerns facing our nation - disaster preparedness and climate resilience. Fiji is a country that knows the devastating impacts of natural disasters. We have experienced severe cyclones, floods, coastal erosion, and the impacts of climate change. Our people have suffered losses of homes, crops, livelihoods, and in some cases, lives. Therefore, disaster management must never be treated as an afterthought.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, regional climate agencies have already highlighted the possibility of developing El Niño conditions later this year. This warning should not be ignored. El Niño events can bring prolonged dry conditions, reduced rainfall, water shortages, increased pressure on agriculture, and greater risks to food security. The question before this Parliament is…

(Honourable Member interjected)

HON. V. NATH.- You read the book properly, Honourable Minister! Is this Budget sufficiently prepared to respond to these possibilities?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Yes!

HON. V. NATH.- No! The Opposition's assessment is that the level of preparedness demonstrated in this budget is not adequate. Even the Honourable Minister, during his presentation, he failed to announce...

(Honourable Members interjected)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. V. NATH.- We see limited emphasis on drought preparedness, emergency logistics, water security measures, and prepositioning of essential supplies. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government must understand that disaster management is not only about responding after the disaster occurs. True leadership is about preparation before disaster strikes.

The allocation of approximately $2.2 million for evacuation centers is important. But disaster preparedness cannot only focus on where people will shelter after an event. We must also focus on how communities will survive before, during, and after prolonged drought.

Where will communities get drinking water? How will farmers protect livestock and crops? How will the maritime islands receive emergency supplies? How prepared are our health facilities for increased pressure? Where are the contingency plans?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another issue that deserves greater attention in this Budget is the continuing migration of our people from rural to maritime communities into urban centers. Year after year, we witness the same trend. Families continue to leave their villages settlements in search of employment, education, healthcare, and better opportunities, because they believe these opportunities no longer exist in their own communities. This is not merely a demographic shift. It is a reflection of unequal development across our country.

While the Government speaks of balanced development, this Budget contains very little to encourage Fijians to remain in or return to rural and maritime areas. There are no meaningful incentives for young families to relocate. There are no targeted programmes to encourage skilled workers, entrepreneurs, or small businesses to establish themselves outside our major urban centres. There are no initiatives that makes rural living more economically attractive than continuing the migration into already congested towns and cities.

As a result, urban centres continue to experience increasing pressure on housing, roads, public services, water supply, healthcare facilities, and other essential public services. We have seen this, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Informal settlements continue to grow, traffic congestion worsens, and demand for Government services continues to outpace available resources. Although I thank the CEO of FRA for removing two of the humps in Tamavua Village, which has eased a little bit of traffic, at least by half an hour. Still, if you take the main road, it takes two hours to reach Suva in peak hours.

At the same time, many rural communities continue to lose their young people. This is very alarming, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and you will agree with me. Reducing agricultural productivity, worsening local economy, and leaving villages with ageing population. We have seen that the ageing population are left in the village when the youths move away, or they come to the urban areas.

If we are serious about achieving balanced national development, then Government must do more than simply allocate funds for rural infrastructure. We must create genuine economic opportunities that make rural and maritime living a practical and attractive choice. We should make it an effective choice, too. This would include stronger incentives in the agricultural enterprise, support for rural tourism, assistance to small and medium-sized businesses, improved digital connectivity, better access to financial services, and targeted programmes that encourage professionals, teachers, nurses, and other skilled workers to serve in rural communities. A successful nation is not one where everyone is forced to move to cities in search of opportunity. A successful nation is one where every Fijian, regardless of where they live, can access opportunities, build a livelihood, and enjoy a decent quality of life.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, unless we address this growing urban migration, the pressures on our towns and cities will continue to increase, while many rural and maritime communities continue to decline. This Budget was an opportunity to begin reversing that trend, but unfortunately, it has failed to improve the vision or the incentives necessary to achieve that objective.

When the Coalition Government was first formed in December 2022, every member of the Coalition was appointed either as a Cabinet Minister or Assistant Minister.

(Honourable Members interjected)

HON. V. NATH.- Facts! Facts bite! In January 2026, when this side of the House joined the Coalition Government, additional ministerial portfolios were created to accommodate the newly appointed members as Ministers or Assistant Ministers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today the Government comprises of 22 Ministers and 13 Assistant Ministers at an estimated annual cost of around $6.3 million. This figure also includes executive support staff, such as drivers and senior secretaries, and does not even take into account the additional operational costs required to support their offices. This raises an important question - why do we need such a large Executive when members of Parliament can effectively contribute to Government business without necessarily holding ministerial office?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Clearly ineffective.

HON. V. NATH.- At a time, when Government is calling for restraint in public expenditure and reducing operational budgets across ministries, maintaining such a large executive sends a conflicting message. The public is entitled to ask whether the creation of these additional Ministerial and Assistant Ministerial positions was genuinely driven by the need of executive governance, or whether it was intended to strengthen the Government's Parliamentary numbers and secure support for the passage of Bills, legislation and other parliamentary business. These are legitimate questions that deserve clear answers in this interest of transparency, accountability and prudent use of public funds.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Here, here!

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this reminds me of 1987, 1988, there were twice, I can recall, the devaluation. I heard the honourable Prime Minister speaking this morning about some senior people who have served government and not paid. Yes, of course, their salaries were deducted by 20 percent and it has never gone up and was never returned to them. If the honourable Prime Minister can rethink about it. Three issues during his Term as the leader. Nothing is new for us.

This Government has failed in a number of places, in terms of delivery in rural Fiji with only 0.7 percent of the total budget and 18 percent of the total budget on the capax. That means 18 percent of the budget for capital projects and that is very alarming. I expected my good friend, the honourable Minister for Health to acknowledge his work, but unfortunately, I was waiting to hear something about the Nausori Health Centre. The Nausori Health Centre, after half a century, remains a health centre. It is serving three Provinces, and it remains a health centre. Honourable Minister. I believe the people in Nausori, when they came for public consultation, they raised their voices on this concern. Looking at this, the Government has failed in a number of places, which I have alluded to earlier, and I do not support this Budget.

(Honourable Members interjected)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we certainly look forward to the honourable Members who have yet to make theirs in the coming days. We shall continue with the list on the Batting Order tomorrow morning. Honourable Members, this brings to an end our sitting today, and I wish you all a restful evening. Parliament is adjourned until 9.30 tomorrow morning.

The Parliament adjourned at 9.24 p.m.