

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

TUESDAY, 14TH JULY, 2026

[CORRECTED COPY]

C O N T E N T S

														<u>Pages</u>
Minutes	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	1186
Communication from the Speaker	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	1186
Debate on the 2026-2027 Appropriation Bill 2026	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	1186-1285
<u>List of Speakers</u>				<u>Page Nos.</u>										
(1)	Hon. I. Naivalurua				(1186-1191)									
(2)	Hon. V. Pillay				(1191-1195)									
(3)	Hon. M.K. Nalumisa				(1195-1200)									
(4)	Hon. R.R. Sharma				(1200-1204)									
(5)	Hon. S. Nand				(1205-1209)									
(6)	Hon. J.R. Vocea				(1209-1213)									
(7)	Hon. K.K. Lal				(1213-1217)									
(8)	Hon. Ratu J.B. Niudamu				(1217-1221)									
(9)	Hon. Ratu R.S.S. Vakalalabure				(1221-1225)									
(10)	Hon. L.S. Qereqeretabua				(1226-1230)									
(11)	Hon. A.M. Radrodro				(1230-1236)									
(12)	Hon. S.T. Koroilavesau				(1236-1239)									
(13)	Hon. P.K. Ravunawa				(1239-1243)									
(14)	Hon. T.R. Matasawalevu				(1243-1245)									
(15)	Hon. J. Saukuru				(1246-1250)									
(16)	Hon. A.D. Singh				(1250-1254)									
(17)	Hon. C.J. Singh				(1254-1258)									
(18)	Hon. L.D. Tabuya				(1258-1262)									
(19)	Hon. P. Tikoduadua				(1262-1266)									
(20)	Hon. S. Tubuna				(1266-1270)									
(21)	Hon. A.A. Maharaj				(1270-1275)									
(22)	Hon. N.T. Tuinaceva				(1275-1279)									
(23)	Hon. Ro. F.Q. Tuisawau				(1279-1284)									

TUESDAY, 14TH 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 K.V. Ravu; honourable P.D. Kumar; and honourable S.S. Kirpal.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Monday, 13th July, 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.

COMMUNICATION FROM THE SPEAKER

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 on the internet. Thank you for your interest in this week's National Budget Debate.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE 2026-2027 APPROPRIATION BILL 2026

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise in this august House to contribute to the 2026-2027 National Budget debate with my full support.

At the outset, I take this opportunity to express my profound gratitude to the people of Fiji. Their unwavering support for our people towards the work that we do continues to inspire our service to the nation. It challenges us to do better, to be better, to do more and to be more.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to commend the honourable Minister for Finance and his team for a responsible budget for sustainable future, that speaks directly to the challenges we are facing today while creating opportunities for a better tomorrow. This Budget reflects the future we seek to build for our people. It is an investment in the foundations for a stronger, safer and prosperous Fiji. I wish to emphasize that any budget is a step towards success.

This Budget strengthens the institution that protects our communities, supports digital transformation that creates opportunities and builds a stable environment that encourages investment, supports economic growth, and improves the lives of our people. The responsibilities entrusted to the Ministry of Policing and Communication are closely connected. Policing helps keep our people safe. Communication helps connect our people to opportunities. Together, they help build confidence upon

which a modern and successful nation depends.

As a Government, we have the privilege and the responsibility to serve our people. That responsibility calls us to lead with integrity; steward public resources wisely and always place the interests of our people first. That is what this Budget seeks to do – to invest responsibility in safer communities. It invests in trusted institutions, stronger digital capability, and, above all, it invests in our people. These investments strengthen the nation's resilience, enhance public safety, and support a secure environment conducive to economic and social progress.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the first responsibility of every government is to keep its people safe. Without safety, there can be no confidence. Without confidence, there can be no investment. And without trusted institutions, there can be no lasting prosperity. It is about creating a safe and stable environment where our people can live in peace. Businesses can invest with confidence. Businesses continue to choose Fiji, and our economy can grow.

With the inclusion of the responsibility for communication to my portfolio, I commend the allocation of \$34.2 million to my Ministry. This investment will strengthen the Ministry's ability to lead national security policy, coordinate policing reforms and continue Fiji's digital transformation. The Ministry remains committed to strengthening the legal and institutional framework that supports effective, accountable, and modern policing. Equally important is the funding allocated for the review of legislation.

Strong institutions also require modern laws, and our legislation must keep pace. That is why this Budget will continue to support implementation of the new Police Bill, which is currently before the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights. When enacted, Mr. Speaker Sir, this legislation will modernise policing in Fiji by strengthening accountability, improving governance and providing a clearer framework for professional policing.

Few issues concern our people more today than the growing threat of illicit drugs and transnational organised crime. Drugs destroy lives, destabilise families, undermine communities and threaten the security of our nation. Over the past three years, Fiji has seen more than \$4 billion worth of illicit drugs circulated within local communities by external and internal actors. With over 2,400 drug-related cases recorded late last year alone, Government continues to make the fight against illicit drugs and organised crime one of its highest priorities. While legislative reforms are essential to support development, enactment and implementation of key laws and regulatory frameworks, they remain equally important to combat the threats of illicit drugs.

Through this Budget, \$1.6 million has been allocated to strengthen Fiji's counter-narcotics capability. This investment will support the continued establishment of the Counter-Narcotics Bureau, the recruitment of specialised personnel, and the development of the Counter-Narcotics Bill needed to provide the Bureau with a strong legal foundation. This is a direct investment in the enforcement, prevention, and security of our people.

Two months ago, the General Policy Direction on the National Coordination of Transnational Serious and Organised Crime, also known as TSOC and Illicit Drug Enforcement in Fiji, was issued and subsequently endorsed by Cabinet last month. The intention of this policy is to provide clear direction for strong and coordinated national responses to detect, disrupt, dismantle, neutralise and curb TSOC and illicit drug networks. These joint efforts will be manned from the National Joint Enforcement Centre (NJEC), where personnel will work to share intelligence, coordinate operations with a common purpose.

I also acknowledge the role of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces in supporting the ongoing

joint operations with the Fiji Police Force. Under these collaborations, illicit drug cases in the first quarter of 2025 to 2026 dropped by 30 percent, with overall crime rates decreasing by 18 percent. These operations form a crucial framework for sustaining, coordinating, and safeguarding Fiji's national security against the harms of illicit drugs. However, enforcement alone is not enough. The effective change requires contribution from all sectors, and success can only be achieved when all of us stand together. This Budget, therefore, supports prevention, rehabilitation, and coordination across Government. It makes Fiji a safer place to live, work, and invest.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we now live in a time where digital transformation is no longer optional. It is essential to economic growth, service delivery, and national resilience. That is why this Government continues to invest in building a Fiji that is more connected, more inclusive, and better prepared for the opportunities of the digital economy. Through this Budget, the Digital Transformation Office and Communication Portfolio have been allocated a total of \$17 million for the new financial year. This investment will help modernise government services, strengthen national connectivity, and support our vision for a digital economy that creates opportunity for all our people.

A key priority for the Ministry is digitising government services. The whole-of-government service mapping exercise will create a clear pathway for more services to be delivered online over the coming years. Currently, the exercise has identified 788 critical services across the whole-of-government, 385 of which, will be digitised by 2030. This will be complemented by the finalisation and rollout of the whole-of-government chatbot interface, which will allow easy and convenient access to Government services by members of the public.

Similarly, the continued development of the unified service portal and the government data exchange platform is expected to be completed by this year and will allow Ministries to provide faster, simpler, and responsible Government services. This will be supported by the finalisation of the Privacy and Data Protection Legislation. and the development of the Data Management Framework. For our people, this will mean less paperwork, less waiting, and improved service delivery.

The National ID Programme, an initiative that will establish the strategic framework for developing and operating a secure, inclusive, and interoperable national identification system for all Fijian citizens is progressing well. Consultations have now been completed, and the National ID Card Bill will soon be tabled before Parliament. The work will also continue on the development of a National Artificial Intelligence Framework and the National Cloud Policy for stronger data management and responsible use of AI across Government. These initiatives will help ensure that innovation is embraced responsibly, securely, and in ways that benefit our people. All these works cannot be achieved unless we have the right legislation.

The communication portfolio has successfully completed the first two rounds of consultation for the review of the Telecommunications Act 2008, and work on finalising this will commence shortly. The continued rollout of the Universal Service Scheme is helping ensure that more of our people can participate in education, business, and government services, regardless of where they live. Fifty satellite broadband community Wi-Fi deployments are currently online with the aim of connecting remote and underserved communities throughout Fiji. Phase two of this initiative will commence in the upcoming financial year and will connect over 300 new sites and communities across Fiji.

The continued expansion of 5G services, together with enhanced 4G, will further strengthen the national connectivity. The 5G network is now available along the Suva, Nadi, and Lautoka corridor, with phase rollout continuing nationwide as per the network roadmap set by the

Government. The Ministry will also continue to restructure its telecentre programme with three new telecentre developments in process with an additional three earmarked for Taveuni, Lau and Ra to commence in the new financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as Fiji becomes more connected, we must also become more secure. Technology is creating new opportunities for our people and our economy, but it is also creating more risks. For the new financial year priority will be on investing in national digital resilience to strengthen our national cyber posture and capability across government. Plans of implementing Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) monitoring tools, formal submissions on CERT operating models to cabinet and a dedicated social media site to provide cyber related information are currently in development.

In support of these efforts, progress has been made on the development of a specific incident cyber response plan in collaboration with other Pacific nations to ensure that our region can collectively detect, respond and recover from cyber threats effectively. Additionally, to ensure oversight regarding the implementation of various Government cyber projects and activities the ministry will establish a national cyber security working group, cyber incident response steering committee and the cyber incident crisis taskforce among other forums.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we commend the allocation of \$13 million to the ITC portfolio to strengthen the national digital infrastructure. This investment will improve the resilience of government systems, strengthen cyber security and help protect the digital services upon which our people increasingly depend. The investments made over recent years are already delivering important results.

The Government's national operation centre and security operation centre are now providing 24-hour monitoring of Government's digital infrastructure. This is a significant achievement that will support Government in having dedicated round-the-clock monitoring and response capability for ICT and network infrastructure. As Government concludes its comprehensive review of the national ICT network infrastructure, several valuable recommendations from this review has emerged to further strengthen Government digital services. These recommendations have already been identified by the ministry and have been implemented as part of government's ongoing digital transformation programme.

The Ministry remains dedicated to investing in critical digital infrastructure and technologies to enhance and elevate the Government's cyber posture and delivery of digital services to all Fijians. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the collective work undertaken by the Digital Government Transformation Office (DGTO) and the communication team in the previous financial year has yielded milestones that have advanced national digital connectivity throughout Fiji. I would like to mention a few. These include the:

- establishment of the Fiji Computer Emergency Response Team;
- launch of the National Cybersecurity and Resilience Strategy 2026 to 2031;
- cybersecurity website for timely and effective support to cyber-related incidents;
- completion of Fiji's National Privacy and Personal Data Protection Policy, which is aligned to international standards and best practise; and
- completion of the digital Fiji spec, including e-profile registration and the whole of Government Data Exchange Platform (DXP).

Together, Mr. Speaker, Sir, these initiatives are helping build a safer and more resilient digital environment for our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through this budget, the Government has allocated a total of \$226.5 million to the Fiji Police Force, with a reduced allocation of \$13.8 million from the previous fiscal year. It does not diminish the Fiji Police Force's commitment to public safety and security. The continued commitment of police officers in upholding the rule of law and maintaining national peace is a testament to the enduring dedication of the Fiji Police Force. It is the character and integrity of officers, not the size of the budget allocation, that defines the measure of our police institution. The overwhelming majority of police officers serve our nation with professionalism, discipline and integrity. They work long hours, serve far from their families and many place themselves in harm's way to protect our communities. They deserve our gratitude and respect.

This Budget challenges the Fiji Police Force to do more with less, to be innovative and to modernise its operation and strengthen partnerships. Managing this re-prioritisation requires technical restructuring rather than cutting core services. Our police officers will have to work smarter and re-focus priorities. By embracing these aspects, we not only sustain operation but transform them to deliver effective policing. The Budget also recognises that strong policing depends not only on dedicated officers, but also on providing them with the equipment, infrastructure and support needed to do their jobs well.

At this juncture, I wish to raise the recent reports concerning police misconduct that understandably caused concern to our people. I understand these concerns, but I also want our people to understand something important. A professional Police Force is not one that claims to have no problems. It is one that is prepared to confront problems honestly, investigate them fairly and take action when standards are not met. As accountability becomes stronger more issues will come to light. This should not weaken public confidence, rather it should strengthen it. It tells our people that integrity matters and that no one is above the law. Integrity is the foundation of public trust and public trust is the foundation of effective policing. As Minister, I will always support officers who serve our nation with courage, discipline and honour.

During the 2025-2026 financial year, significant progress was achieved in the strengthening of police infrastructure nationwide. I will mention a few - Phase 1 of CCTV works linking Suva and Nausori have been completed for wider visibility; Phase 2 of the wider area enetwork project; and the construction of the Vuna, South Taveuni and Daria Community Posts ready to be completed. These achievements demonstrate Government's continued commitment to improving police facilities and enhancing service deliveries to communities across Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the support of international and regional partners, we will continue to invest in a more secure and resilient economy. Our recent engagements with the Government of Japan have resulted in the investment of more than \$1million into the project of improving the cybersecurity capability of Pacific Island countries which will commence in September this year. Our current collaboration with the United States of America and Indonesia on counter-narcotic continues to yield significant results with relevant training, exercises and capacity building opportunities for our police officers.

In partnership with the UK High Commission and UNDP, I led a delegation to Vatulele and Beqa last week, to attend the graduation of villagers that participated in the Boat Master's Licence and Restricted Master Engineer Course under the *Solesolevaki Ni Veitaqomaki* – Matanitu, *Vanua kei na Lotu* Model (CVM-CMS Model). I am happy to report, Mr. Speaker, that this project is working extremely well.

As I conclude, let me reiterate that this Budget is more than just figures on a balance sheet. It is about the kind of Fiji we are building together, a Fiji that is safer, better connected, more resilient, and full of opportunities for our people.

I wish to acknowledge the dedicated men and women of the Fiji Police Force, the staff of the Ministry of Policing and Communication, and our many partners across Government, our traditional leaders, faith communities, civil society organisations, and development partners. No budget can solve every challenge in a single year, but a responsible budget should strengthen the foundations upon which future generations will build. The decisions we make today, will shape the Fiji our children inherit tomorrow. Let us ensure they inherit a nation that is safer, stronger, more connected, and full of opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, I commend the 2026-2027 National Budget with my full support.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I am conscious of quite a few coughs and coughing fits coming from Members yesterday in Chambers. We are all aware of the ever-present flu that has been making its rounds within our population, and the honourable Minister for Health has kindly given two boxes of masks that are available from our Secretariat to any Member who may care to use or wear them at their convenience as a precautionary measure.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to provide my response on the 2026-2027 National Budget that was delivered in this August House. This Budget is a document of complete betrayal for the backbone of our rural economy, especially our hardworking sugarcane farmers and all stakeholders that carry the industry and time and again have sacrificed to ensure farmers' canes are delivered on time, thus assisting our nation's economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to provide my response on the 2026-2027 National Budget that was delivered in this august House. This budget is a document of complete betrayal for the backbone of our rural economy, especially our hard-working sugarcane farmers. All stakeholders that carry the industry and time and again have sacrificed to ensure that our farmers' cane are delivered on time, thus assisting our nation's economy.

Let us first address the false narrative being pushed by the Government benches that their temporary fuel subsidy completely covers the gap for farmers. We do acknowledge the fuel subsidy, but it does not fully compensate every farmer, for instance, those in remote areas such as Nadrala in Kavanagasau, Sigatoka. This Administration thinks that a short-term fuel band-aid solution can alter the underlying broken myth of our industry. It cannot. When you look at the total delivery cost layout combined with the soaring fuel realities, the financial burden remains squarely and heavily on the shoulders of the grower.

Let us look closely at the full harvesting cost breakdown that this Budget completely ignores. Before a single stalk of cane can leave, even leave our fields, and before we can even think about the cost of hiring a lorry to move the crop to the mill, our upfront production expenses have almost already completely eaten the heart out of the \$85 guaranteed price.

Let us look at the calculations based on how a farmer manages his harvesting operations. If a grower has to rely entirely on hiring private equipment owners, they are paying on an average of \$27.71 per tonne just for hiring an operator. Even if they work through cooperatives to save cost, the rate is still heavy with \$24.63 per tonne just for the basic machinery without the cost for an operator.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let the House do the calculation. Add those patent figures together for the farmer utilising private owners' \$27.71 for harvesting, \$22 for inputs, \$15 for land preparation, and \$5.37 for rent. That means before a lorry even arrives at the farm gate, the grower has already spent a baseline cost of \$70.08 just to grow and harvest it. That leaves the farmer with a miserable amount of \$14.92 remaining from the guaranteed price. Even if they use a cooperative, the baseline cost sits at \$67 per tonne, leaving them with just \$18. Remember, out of that tiny remaining balance, they

have not paid a single cent to transport the crop to the mill.

The moment we add transportation to the equation, the \$85 minimum price completely collapses, and our growers are forced by their own government to work at a direct financial loss. If delivery costs fall into the range of \$45 to \$60 a tonne or more once field shifts and true distances are accounted for, what is honestly left for the farming family? Absolutely nothing. They are paying out of their own pockets to supply cane to the Fiji Sugar Corporation.

This season, our farmers have already suffered a massive drop in tonnage due to a multitude of factors entirely beyond our control, from climate disruptions to crumbling infrastructure. Yet, the farmer is expected to carry the entire financial burden of the industry on their back.

Apart from the hardworking growers, everyone else in the supply chain gets taken care of directly from our delivery payout. The lorry drivers get their money. The lorry owners get paid. The manual cane cutters get their wages. The water men, the headmen, the line men, the tractor owners, and the tractor drivers all receive their guaranteed payments from our sweat. Let us not forget that the executive staff and workers at the Fiji Sugar Corporation will be paid their full, comfortable salaries on time, completely shielded from the losses from the fields. Everyone gets their guaranteed cut, but what is left for the farmer and his family to survive on? This industry is treated like it is a charity run by the growers, yet the farming family is completely left out of their own economy.

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 successive taxpayer-funded assistance, debt guarantees, debt write-offs, and annual subsidies have placed a significant burden on the nation's financials while production continues to decline.

This is precisely why this Parliament has established the Parliamentary Special Committee on Sugar Industry, 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 consultations in the West were quite an experience. The evidence demonstrates that the gradual transition towards an alternate high-value agriculture industry is in the best interest of our farmers in the nation, and the Government should consider those recommendations. However, the cause is ultimately adapted. It must protect the welfare of our cane farmers, preserve rural livelihoods, ensure responsible stewardship of public finances, and create sustainable economic opportunities for future generations.

Let me expand on what the experience in the West actually looked like on the ground, because while the Committee has a mandate to listen, one of the committees during his presentation showed nothing but absolute disrespect and arrogance to our farmers, especially in Ba. The behavior of certain individuals towards our growers was completely disgraceful. When growers stood up to raise genuine, desperate concerns about their livelihoods, their rising debts, and the survival of their children, they were met with unmitigated arrogance. That individual literally told the struggling, lifelong farmers to shut up and sit down.

Essentially, that particular gentleman represents the government as a board member in a well-known public entity. The growers of this country do not deserve to be insulted, dismissed, and humiliated when they are standing up to fight for their families. That official owes an unreserved public apology to the farmers of Ba, and the Minister needs to ensure that such arrogance is wiped

out of these consultations immediately. You cannot ask the farmer to sweat in the sun to fund your salaries and then tell them to shut up when asked where their money is going. The fundamental issue is here that the people who are running the sugarcane industry are two-dimensional thinkers. They are completely unable to think outside the box.

When you have been using the same broken formulas and the same debt system for decades, how do you expect the industry to grow? We need real innovation within the sugar industry to bring it back to life, but this administration completely...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V. PILLAY .- You still remember your promise of the state-of-the-art sugar mill? Yes, so keep quiet.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. V. PILLAY .- But this administration completely lacks the vision to do it. Look at how they set the price. Basing the current price purely on the global price for sugar is completely unrealistic. Look at other communities in Fiji. In other communities, when there is a real shortage, or when production drops, the actual price will naturally increase to protect the producer.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V. PILLAY.- Why is sugar the exception? We can easily increase the price of local sugar right here in Fiji. The FCCC, FSC and Government need to look at this option immediately to help try to offset some of the high costs our farmers are facing. But instead of looking at these practical domestic adjustments, they look away and blame global conditions, they lack the capacity to think innovatively. This brings me directly to why it is absolutely critical for special audit into Fiji Sugar Corporation. The Fiji Sugar Corporation has gone completely lost.

It has become a monument of mismanagement on a grand scale. Millions of dollars in taxpayer guarantees are handed over to the corporation every single year if the actual growers are left out to dry. The management of FSC has been completely incompetent, hiding the operational reality from the public and the taxpayers who constantly bail them out. We need to bring absolute accountability to this institution.

We demand a special audit to reduce administrative waste, cut down on the massive hidden operational cost, and bring corporate executives to task. Why should executives sit on lavish salaries while the people who produce the actual wealth cannot even afford the cost of diesel? Look at the way the Fiji Sugar Corporation operates. Last year, many of us were completely unpaid for the stand-over cane. The mills failed, logistics failed, cane stood in the fields and rotted, and the money has still not been returned to the farmers. Even though these costly delays were the direct fault of the Fiji Sugar Corporation, that is money diverted from the pockets of our family due to pure corporate failure.

And then look at the bank and penalties. These penalties are being actively deducted from the grower's payouts, but that money is not being returned to help the neighbouring farmers or victims who suffer from those devastating fires. The farmer loses his crop, loses his income, gets penalised by Fiji Sugar Corporation, and the penalty money simply vanishes in the corporate black hole of the corporation. Where is fairness in that?

Furthermore, we must look at the total lack of performance from Sugar Marketing Authority.

What is their actual role? What are they doing day in and day out to secure better returns for our sugar? Global sugar prices have the potential to rise, and alternate markets exist, yet our marketing authority is doing absolutely nothing to shield us, leaving us drown under outdated formulas. Even if we look at our domestic market, the sugar price locally can be increased easily to support our local industry and inject cash directly back to our producers. But this administration completely lacks the vision or the political will to make those necessary structural adjustments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite the heavy frustration, the absolute failure of this administration, the unpaid bill, and the intense uncertainty surrounding the weather, we cannot let the Sugar Sector die out of desperation. I want to formally thank all the farmers, my cooperative, other cooperatives, and harvesting gangs who have already stepped up, registered, and started harvesting for this season. I strongly encourage all other growers across the sugar belt to submit their Memorandum of Gang Agreement (MOGA) and start harvesting their crops and start harvesting their crops to immediately protect their households and save what is left of our industry. We must get the cane to the mills.

There are people out there right now sitting in comfortable positions calling for a boycott of harvesting season. But let us be completely honest about who these people are. The individuals calling for a boycott are sitting comfortably. They are eating well, drinking well, and sleeping soundly in their warm beds. They do not lose a single night of sleep when the family gets evicted because they cannot pay their lease or the farmers' costs increasing due to slow or late harvest. When the bad weather hits and the cane begin to rot, these boycotters will not come to your fields to assist the farmers. They will disappear completely into their comfortable lives, leaving the grower to face total financial guilt alone. A boycott only hurts the very people it claims to defend, and we cannot afford political brinkmanship without people surviving.

Furthermore, to add salt to the sentiments of our farmers, I am disappointed to hear the Permanent Secretary for Finance in a public forum tell this nation that we must stop fooling ourselves about reviving this industry. He stated that we cannot revive the industry and explicitly warned that attempting to do so would mean putting more than a billion dollars of taxpayers' money down the drain. Let us be completely honest in this august House today.

(Honourable Members interjected)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order! Just give me a moment, please. Can I just address this side of the House? Please let him have his opportunity to express his views, and then you can respond at your own time when your time comes up. Please, can you do that for the decorum of the House? Please proceed.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us be completely honest in this august House today. Why is it dead? It is dead because for far too long, the leadership of this sector has completely left the out-of-box thinking required to sustain it. But on the ground, what we, the farmers, are actually seeing from these individuals is pure, simple, and unmitigated incompetence. Thousands of ordinary Fijians from farming families to lorry operators are directly dependent on the sugar sector for their survival. We desperately need innovative and bold thinking individuals to drag this industry out of the past and help bring it into the 21st century.

However, this Budget proves that the current leadership is completely unaware of these realities. The honourable Prime Minister and the honourable Minister for Finance proudly called this a responsible Budget for a sustainable future. What an absolute joke! There is nothing responsible about it and there is no future in it for our sugarcane communities if we continue down this path. However, there is a silver lining and hope in this. As the honourable Leader of the Opposition warned, if the evidence demonstrates that the transition is needed to protect our people, we must have

the courage to act. Whatever course is ultimately adopted, it must protect the welfare of our cane farmers and preserve rural livelihoods.

This industry has been the backbone of our economy and provided support and sustainability to our beloved farming families, communities and sugar sector fraternity, and all efforts must be made to ensure that the industry survives despite the mounting challenges. I strongly urge the Government to review the guaranteed price to support the farmers, as the current \$85 per tonne guaranteed price is not sufficient to cover all costs and provide much-needed relief to the farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of Fiji need a government that has a plan and a true lasting vision for the sugar industry, our farmers and our nation.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, and members of the public who are present in the gallery and joining us through live stream, a very good morning to you all.

I rise this morning to heartily support the 2026-2027 National Budget, aptly themed '*A Responsible Budget for Sustainable Future*.' This is indeed a responsible Budget by a responsible Government. This responsible Budget prepared difficult circumstances due to global fuel crisis as well as uncertainties. As a reality, the Budget was crafted realistically and prudently.

A responsible government does not ignore economic realities and does not pretend that revenue crisis, global uncertainty, infrastructure backlogs and the needs of ordinary Fijians do not exist. A responsible government makes careful choices. It protects essential services, supports economic growth, manages expenditure prudently and invests in the foundation that will secure a sustainable future. That is precisely what this Budget does.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the honourable Minister for Finance for presenting a Budget that is prudent, honest and forward looking. It is a Budget that places national interest above short-term popularity and lays the foundation for a stronger and a more resilient Fiji. As we debate this final Budget for this Parliamentary Term, it is appropriate that we pause, not simply to look ahead, but also to reflect on how far we have come together.

When the Coalition Government resumed office in December 2022, we inherited significant challenges. Our economy was recovering from the effects of the pandemic, public debt has risen sharply, critical infrastructure projects have stalled, and confidence in many public institutions needed rebuilding. The easy option would have been to postpone difficult decisions.

Instead, our Coalition Government chose responsibility over rhetoric, we chose reform over complacency, and we chose long-term nation-building over short-term applause. That is exactly what the 2026-2027 National Budget represents. There is also a lot of harping from the other side of the House on the status of the public debt. I want to refer to a report by the IMF released in May 2026. It says that "Fiji's public debt remains sustainable, although, debt vulnerabilities are assessed as a model."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the Ministry of Local Government the budget is about much more than municipal administration. It is about reshaping Fiji's development, geography and opportunities that are no longer concentrated in a handful of urban centres but reaches every region, every municipality and every community. The Ministry therefore plays a much broader role than many realise through urban planning, municipal governance, development, infrastructure and legislative reform, creating conditions for private sector investment, employment and balance, regional development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this budget provides \$29.5 million to the Ministry of Local Government to continue this important work. This process will allow us to modernise local Government, strengthen municipal services, improve urban planning, reform of the administration and continue investing in projects that directly improve the lives of ordinary Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while a significant proportion of the municipal allocation is classified as operating expenditure, these are not simply administrative costs. Much of this funding directly supports essential services delivered through our agencies, such as National Fire Authority and Municipal Councils which include:

- (a) \$8.46 million grant for the National Fire Authority;
- (b) \$2.3 million for emergency services;
- (c) \$5.2 million in waste collection subsidies for municipal councils; and
- (d) \$540,000 to support the rural maritime areas governed by the Rural Local Authority.

The budget also provides for professional support to municipal councils, governance initiatives, staff training and international collaboration to strengthen the capacity and performance of local government institutions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the past three years, this Government has demonstrated that we do not simply announce projects, we deliver them. We completed the Savusavu Municipal Market, providing modern facilities, for farmers, fishers, market vendors and small businesses in Savusavu and close-by areas. It means to further commissioned the Dreketi Mini-Market for market vendors and commuters travelling through the district. This facility gives travellers and locals a safe, weatherproof, hygienic space to buy and sell produce. We delivered the Nakasi market, creating a new commercial hub in one of Fiji's fast-growing urban corridors and bringing economic opportunities closer to the people.

We even completed the Levuka Market, supporting commerce while preserving the unique character of Fiji's first capital. We complete the Nabouwalu Passenger Terminal, significantly improving connectivity between Vanua Levu and Viti Levu, and strengthening economic activity in the Northern Division.

We also completed the redevelopment of Govind Park in Ba, restoring an important national sporting facility that will continue to support youth development, community events and local businesses. Most importantly, a significant boost to the Ba Town Council revenue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have also provided six garbage compactor trucks to support the municipal councils with solid waste management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the achievements that I am most proud of is the revival of the New Town Development Programme. For far too long, economic growth has remained concentrated within a few urban centres, while other regions with enormous potential have waited for investments and opportunity.

This Government has chosen a different path. We believe that development should not be defined by geography. Every region deserves an opportunity to contribute to Fiji's growth and prosperity. The continuation of the New Town Development Programme, supported by \$3.8 million in this budget, reflects that vision. New Towns are economic frontiers that create jobs, attract businesses, stimulate housing, commerce and industry. They reduce pressure on existing urban centres while unlocking the potential of regions that have long remained underdeveloped. Most importantly, they create opportunities for our resource owners and traditional landowners to become

genuine participants in Fiji's economic transformation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for generations, many landowners have watched development occur elsewhere, while receiving limited benefits from the economic value of their own land. This Government believes that those who own land should also share in the prosperity that development creates. New Town development, allows communities to become partners in investment rather than spectators to development. Through the Nabouwalu New Town Project, we will be trailing the initiative of greater landowners' participation. There is balance regional development, as well as inclusive growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the most important announcements in this Budget is the formal declaration of Navua as a town. This is more than an administrative milestone, but a fulfilment of a promise made more than a decade ago. For more than 10 years, one of Fiji's fastest-growing commercial and residential centres was denied the governance framework and municipal administration that its people deserve.

As Navua continued to grow, businesses expanded, new residential developments emerged, and economic activity increased. Yet, the town remained without the dedicated municipal governance needed to properly plan its future, improve services, and attract investment. I believe that communities experiencing rapid growth, deserve governance arrangements that match their aspirations. The declaration of Navua as a town to provide dedicated municipal leadership, improve planning, environmental control, strengthen environmental management, and create a stronger platform for investment, and more importantly, give the people of Navua the opportunity to shape the future of their own community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a responsible Budget is not measured only by the infrastructure we build but is equally measured by the quality of services we provide every single day to our people. Clean streets, efficient waste collection, effective emergency services, and a healthy environment are not luxuries, but are essential public services that directly affect the health, safety, and well-being of every Fijian. That is why this Budget significantly strengthens the Ministry's commitment to building cleaner, healthier, and more resilient towns and cities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the clearest demonstrations of this commitment is the substantial increase in municipal waste collection subsidies. This Budget increases waste collection subsidies from \$3.2 million to \$5.2 million. This is a significant investment in supporting our Municipal Councils as they respond to increasing urban population, growing waste volumes, and rising service expectations. More importantly, it is an investment in cleaner communities, better public health, and a healthier environment for future generations.

This Budget also marks an important milestone in Fiji's transition towards a circular economy through the launch of Fiji's first municipal Sorting-at-Source Initiative in Sigatoka. For the first time, households participating in the pilot programme will separate recyclable materials from residual waste, reducing pressure on landfill sites, increasing recycling and resource recovery, and encouraging a culture of environmental responsibility within our communities. Complementing this initiative, the Government will commence the remediation of the Sigatoka Dumpsite while continuing the development of long-term landfill solutions, including the Western Division Landfill Project. These investments demonstrate that the Government is not simply managing waste, but transforming the way Fiji approaches waste management through better environmental stewardship and more sustainable urban development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a responsible Government is not only about building infrastructure or facilitating investment, but it is also equally about strengthening governance, accountability, and

public confidence in our institutions. Since 2022, the Ministry has tabled more than 30 Annual Reports of the Councils in this august Parliament, reaffirming our commitment to transparency and restoring sound public sector governance. Today, seven of our thirteen Municipal Councils are only two to three years behind in their audits, while the Rakiraki Town Council has no outstanding audits.

As I travel throughout our municipalities, I am constantly reminded that Government is ultimately about the people. It is about the market vendor who now earns a better income because of improved facilities. It is about the farmer who gets access to markets. It is about the entrepreneurs who see new opportunities emerging in their own communities. It is about families who can see investment and development coming closer to where they live. These are the people who inspire us to continue to build a stronger Fiji.

The Ministry of Housing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the past three years, our Coalition Government has steadily transformed Fiji's housing sector through comprehensive policy reforms, strengthened institutions, and targeted investments. Rather than focussing solely on immediate housing needs, we have established long-term policy and institutional foundations necessary to deliver sustainable housing outcomes for current and future generations. This reflects the very essence of a responsible budget, “investing today to secure a stronger tomorrow.”

The Ministry of Housing has been allocated \$25.64 million for the 2026-2027 financial year compared to \$29.82 million in 2025-2026 financial year. While the overall allocation has reduced, the Coalition Government has maintained its unwavering commitment to addressing Fiji's housing challenges by strategically directing available resources towards programmes that deliver the greatest long-term social economic benefits for Fijian families.

The Ministry's capital investments will continue to support transformative initiatives that directly improve the lives of Fijians, including the expansion of the First Home Ownership Assistance Programme, upgrading and formalisation of informal settlements, the development of affordable housing units, the construction of new public rental flats, and increased capital support for the Housing Authority, the Public Rental Board, the Housing Assistance and Relief Trust (HART), as well as the Koroipita Model Town Extension.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since taking office, the Coalition Government has undertaken one of the most comprehensive housing reform programmes in recent years. We have completed the review and adoption of the National Housing Policy 2025-2030, providing Fiji with a modern policy framework that promotes affordable, inclusive, climate-resilient housing while strengthening coordination across government, statutory agencies, and development partners.

Recognising that housing affordability remains one of the greatest challenges facing low-income households, the Coalition Government also undertook a comprehensive review of the First Home Ownership Assistance Programme. The programme has now been redesigned to ensure that Government assistance is more effectively targeted towards those families who need it most. By focussing support on low-income households and strengthening programme eligibility, the Coalition Government has ensured that public resources are used responsibly and equitably. This reform reflects our commitment to ensuring that hard-working Fijians regardless of income, have a genuine opportunity to own a safe and secure home.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government has also made significant progress through the Informal Settlement Upgrading Programme. Over the past three years, four completed upgrading projects at Cuvu, Ledrusasa, Waidamudamu and Tavela have delivered improved roads, drainage, water supply, sanitation, and other infrastructure for families living in informal settlements. At the same time, new upgrading projects have commenced, while others continue under implementation.

Our housing reforms have also extended to our statutory agencies. Both the Housing Authority and the Public Rental Board have undertaken policy reviews aimed at improving service delivery, increased access to affordable housing and expanding opportunities for home ownership. These reforms strengthen the institution responsible for delivering housing services while ensuring they remain responsive to the changing needs of the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the most significant investments in this Budget is the continued strength of the First Home Ownership Programme. Following a successful review of the programme, the Government has increased funding for households earning \$30,000 and below to \$2.6 million. More importantly, the revised programme now provides grants of up to \$40,000 for home construction and \$30,000 for home purchase for eligible lower-income households, while also increasing assistance for households earning between \$30,001 and \$60,000 with an allocation of \$500,000. These reforms ensure that Government assistance is directed towards those families facing the greatest barriers to entering the housing market and provide thousands of Fijians with realistic pathways towards home ownership.

The Budget also allocates \$10 million, the formalisation of nine informal settlements, (Tore, Sakoca, Field 4, Valewaquyaya, Vuniika, Delaisaweni, Nabare, Lovu Seaside (new), and Caubati (new)) throughout Fiji. These investments will continue upgrading essential infrastructure, improving living conditions and strengthening tenure security of families residing in these communities.

Around \$1.3 million, has been allocated for the relocation and resettlement of informal settlements. The above will assist the Ministry to relocate and resettle close to 1,200 households evicted from Veidogo, Nanuku, Nabua Muslim League and Kilikali Settlements.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the Housing Authority continues to play a central role in delivering the Coalition Government's housing agenda. Over the past two years, the Authority has undergone a significant transformation in both its operational performance as well as its service delivery.

Equally important capital grants and transfers have increased slightly to \$7.79 million. This increased allocation provides additional capital support to the Housing Authority, expands investment in the Public Rental Board, continues Government's partnership with the Koroipita Model Town Extension, increased assistance to the Housing Assistance Relief Trust.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the past three years the Coalition Government has laid the policy institutional and legislative foundations for long-term housing reform. Every serviced lot developed, every settlement upgraded, every family assisted, and every affordable home constructed represents another step towards building stronger communities and improving the quality of life for all Fijians.

It is through responsible leadership, prudent investment, and sustained planning that we will continue delivering a housing sector that supports economic growth, promotes social inclusion, and ensures that every Fijian family can live in a safe, secure, and affordable home.

I am proud to support this Budget, because it invests not only in today's priorities, but in tomorrow's prosperity. It is a Budget that plans for the future and delivers for the present. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the 2026-2027 National Budget and commend it to this august House.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I call upon the next speaker, I am delighted to welcome into our Chambers this morning Mr. David Higgins, the Head of the International Climate and Energy Division, DFAT Australia. You are most welcome to our humble House, Mr. Higgins. We have Ms. Louise Perez and Mr. Ryan Tierney, who are with him, accompanied by Ms. Sai Bale from the High

Commission. Fiji Parliament is, of course, delighted to continue to work with you towards the COP Conference coming up.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, members in the gallery and those tuned in live; *ni sa bula, Namaste, A salaam Walaikum* and a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the fourth budget of the Coalition Government delivered by the second Finance Minister. What has been magnificent about their budgets for all these years is the grand titles: “Rebuilding Our Future,” “An Economically Stable, Secure, Sustainable Fiji,” and for this one “A Responsible Budget.”

I want to ask if the previous budgets were irresponsible under the previous Minister. What the delivery has been, it has been weak, poor, and rather going in circles.

When they came into government, it was their job to take the nation forward, and in 2026, what we see, what we see with this Budget, I call this Budget, in fact the book is there, it is an irresponsible Budget from an oversized Cabinet, in an overspending Government, and they have 18 percent capital and 82 percent operating. When you invest in capital, you are going to get the returns not in operational costs or having a massive Cabinet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2026, a “Responsible Budget” has an income of \$3.8 billion, an expense of \$4.8 billion, a deficit of \$1 billion, a debt repayment of \$436 million, and a gross deficit of \$1.4 billion. To the Government, how are you “responsible” with these figures? How can you borrow and say we are doing well for every Fijian?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me take you on a short journey regarding Fiji's debt history. In 1995, Fiji's debt, was \$998.6 million. That was the debt back then - in 2000, it was \$1.4 billion. I would like to talk about responsibility because by the end of the next financial year, we will have a debt of \$12.58 billion. This Government talks about “responsibility.” Look at the size of their Cabinet! Quantity does not mean quality. It does not determine efficiency. It does not determine the right output, and it does not determine productivity.

When you look at the size of this Cabinet, in fact, let us talk about 8th April, 2025, when the honourable Prime Minister announced the new measures - that civil servant appointments will be on hold. But in 2022, I know it was a method of cost cutting, so Government had to practise what they preached. But on 22nd May, 2026, the Minister for Youth and Sports was reinstated. There was no need for reinstating a Minister when you were cost cutting for the civil servants and the whole of Fiji. They should practise what they preach!

In 2023, they received a thriving, booming, healthy economy that came out of the pandemic. They decided to tax this economy, 15 percent of VAT, 25 percent corporate tax in the third year. They decided to be a bit merciful - they went to 12.5 percent. But then, the repercussions stay within the economy, and to get out of it will take another couple of years. They should have taken the 22 zero rated items and move it to 30.

Just look at the cost of living right now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, under their weak fiscal policies and financial management. They talk about “responsibility.” EFL has imposed an interim fuel surcharge of 5.91 cents per kilowatt per hour, effective from 26th May. They talk about “responsibility.” The Land Transport Authority has increased road fines, almost now \$100 for illegal parking without national wide consultation. On top of that, under their Government, look at the fuel crisis they handled. They like to hide behind the blanket, oh, there is a fuel crisis. When you come to national

governance and leadership, you will have global challenges before you. Leadership is about taking on the challenges, and people have paid a heavy price with the fuel.

On top of that, the “responsibility” they talk about, effective from the 1st September, 2026, a 5 percent tourism tax for hotel and tour operators whose annual turnover is exceeding over \$2 million.

When you borrow, you must borrow for capital projects, not budget support. When you are borrowing for budget support, that means your fiscal policies are not working, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is like Government wants to spend the money that they do not have. So, despite increasing all the taxes, departure tax, tourism tax, and in fact, okay, I will add more salt to the wound, and actually try and wake them up to reality from the delusional bubble this Government is in.

The Reserve Bank of Fiji just said that Fiji's economy is projected to grow to just 1.5 percent, revised from the 3 percent that was forecasted last year in November. Your forecasted growth has reduced, and they talk about “responsibility” in this august House! If we are on this physical trajectory, we shall hit our national debt in the next 3-5 years to \$15 billion. Who is going to pay for that? That is a question that every Fijian should be asking. Is the Government going to pay the government rent? Is the FNPF going to pay? Is the landowners going to pay or the whole of Fijians is going to pay for the mess you guys have created?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the honourable Leader of the Opposition held Government accountable about their promises regarding the fiscal discipline and to lower national debt, I could hear some of them saying, “ratio, ratio,” which means debt-to-GDP ratio. When a father steps out of his house going to earn an 8-5 job, so that he can earn and put food on the table, pay the bills, ensure his children's dreams come to reality, that father's pocket does not know the debt-to-GDP ratio. He knows the savings, the little savings they have, because this Government likes to tax everything that moves, breathes or lives! That is pretty much what their policies are about.

If this is “responsibility,” I would be terrified to see their recklessness. It comes down to a single question. Are they writing a political book? Or is this the reality of ordinary Fijians? These are two very different documents.

When I scrutinised this Budget, I had to think like the Minister of Finance for Fiji. In fact, if I was the Minister of Finance, they would not have been in this mess at all, with a \$1.4 billion gross deficit, because every policy, every single one carries a monetary consequence. As soon as Government makes a decision, there is a cost to it. There is not a gain, not a loss, there is no third option.

A Government that forgets that simple truth does not manage the economy, it merely spends one. What this nation needs is investment, and I mean investment of every kind - residential, industrial, commercial, agricultural - investment of a lifetime.

How does a government build that confidence is through investment. You do not need to be an Economist or a PhD holder to understand one, because government is in the business of enabling businesses and boosting investment. How politicians gain confidence of the people – by speaking of policies, reforms, interventions, and ideas that are backed up by data and research. You cannot be creating false hopes and promises, which are far away from reality. For a government to thrive, it needs to create an environment where the businesses thrive.

When a business succeeds, when a small enterprise in Ba, Labasa and Nausori grows, it looks at everything else that follows. It hires more Fijians, pays better wages, pays more tax, gives investors at home and abroad confidence, puts steady and dignified income in the hands of our landowners,

lease after lease, it builds skills and capacity in our young people, and it keeps a family off the welfare roll.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when you look at the Government Budget, around \$200 billion is going to welfare grants and other supports that the Government is trying to provide to various people at home. When you help a business to grow, it keeps a young Fijian off that one-way flight.

We should have reduced corporate tax. We need to look at commercial rents that are quietly strangling some of the businesses. We need to put real incentives on the table for producers, manufacturers, and exporters. We need to build a producer-based economy from our own soil and own seas, backing up agriculture and fisheries, not as charity, but as an industry. At the same time, we need to ensure that our landowners are paid premium prices when their land is put to agricultural use, because their prosperity and our productivity must rise together. That is the difference between a government that taxes an economy and a government that grows one.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, speaking of the education system, as honourable Hem Chand said yesterday, “the foundation of everything this Budget claims to build on, lies in our education sector.” Yet our teachers are still waiting for their pays. This Government could not even deliver the back-to-school support on time and parents were left running from the Ministry of Education to the Ministry of Finance.

If I look at the TELS scheme, students have raised the issue of poor communication, some left stranded at the airport, others denied the very courses they desired for that they wanted to do. Also, we cannot have students surviving on noodles or breakfast crackers or just one meal a day. A real reform is needed that gives every student a clear, dignified path through their academic career, from the classroom to the campus, without ever being made to beg for what they are owed. Let me raise something deeper here, which was shared to me.

We are producing graduates ready to work for overseas markets and looking at the current statistics for the past three years, four years or five years, around 100,000 skilled and semi-skilled workers have left the country. When you measure over 100,000 people leaving the country, that is a billion-dollar loss to our economy. We need realistic reforms so that our graduates find opportunity, purpose, and prosperity here in Fiji, so that the nation that raised them is the nation that reaps their brilliance. These all come down to the policies set by government to ensure businesses and MSMEs perform, because when they do, the workforce thrives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will move on to the other important thing that the younger generation is asking for – affordable housing. Affordable housing is an issue for a new graduate, and the goal is that every Fijian working under 35 years should have the opportunity to own a modern apartment within five years of starting work. What I propose to Government is a housing plan, own the apartment while the State owns the land. That is something to debate and to discuss later on, but the idea is that, when you look at some of the Government quarters, they are beyond repair and the Government can develop these apartments.

When you look at a six-story, 50-unit apartment with elevator, parking, solar power, security and internet, the cost for this is around \$15 million to \$18 million. If one is sold for around \$180,000 to \$250,000 and government can further subsidise this 10 percent or 20 percent, the return on investment will guarantee next projects making the programme increasingly self-sustaining. This can be done in Suva, Nausori, Lautoka, Nadi, and the target group is young families, first-time homebuyers and civil servants. How can the Government fund this, is either through FNPF or multilateral financing. The long-term benefits are to reduce house pricing, cutting rental costs, reducing brain drain, creates jobs for construction, maintenance, raise value while the state owns the

land and while we retain our young minds of this nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, and this has successfully worked in Singapore. In fact, they have a Land Acquisition Act where they buy land at a cheaper price because Government is being Government, however, I am not proposing that here. This would shift housing from being a privilege to a realistic pathway for young workers, and to the Coalition Government - this is how you borrow to build infrastructure, stimulate the economy and reduce the brain drain while combating other issues we face as a nation.

I would like to turn my attention to the agriculture sector. We are blessed with some of the most fertile soil in the Pacific. While the world is crying out for commodities like kava, coconut, ginger, turmeric, cocoa, dalo and cassava, we grow the wealth and we let other nations add the value and pocket the profit. Fiji must stop being a raw material economy that exports its wealth and imports its poverty. I propose a National Value Addition Agro-Processing Fund, a \$50 million fund phase over the coming years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we could build a permanent export industry. We really need to look at other options apart from the tourism sector, which is heavily dependent on the tourists. We need to have an export industry that pays the farmer, pays the landowning unit and pays the nation year after year. Let us become a producer nation adding value at home with Fijian hands, jobs for our people, exports for the nation and a real future for our young Fijians on the land and sea. That, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a budget worth writing!

Due to the time I have, I would like to talk about the young leaders of our nation. I have spoken about how policies must help the youth to invest in businesses, the workforce, the education, housing, and now, those who dream of leadership. Fiji is a young nation and majority of us are young, yet the question is, how does a youth sit in rooms where the future is actually decided? Too often our young people are met with these tired words, “wait for your turn,” “you are not ready,” or “your time will come.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have heard those words and I have lived them. I would like to share something personal, because I do not see myself forever or retiring in Parliament. I want to be here, as long as I can, at the best of my abilities. When I got elected, I used to sit right at the back and I used to wonder from there, what would it feel like to sit in the front row? When I came into this august House, the purpose got deeper. I have aspirations, just like some have aspirations on the other side of the House, probably to become the Prime Minister in the next elections.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. R.R SHARMA.- It is a good thing!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.-You can become the next Prime Minister!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the challenges were new to me, and what I saw was that there are opportunities for some, and nothing for the others. However, I am speaking for myself. The most beautiful thing that has happened was becoming an independent member, because I could raise people's issues without receiving a long message. I could do that without being held accountable or asking anyone.

Today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what I ask is, there came to a point where I wanted to resign and even leave, because things were difficult and I thought, okay, what am I doing here because opportunities and doors were closing. But Mr. Speaker, Sir, something held me back and I came to

understand that the door that was closed had shown the purpose.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am highlighting the real issues one faces as a young parliamentarian and the House is interjecting. Things like this are not even spoken of because people are afraid to speak. The doors that closed in my face rather, showed me purpose and I told myself that by the time I leave this august Chambers, I want to ensure that the younger generation have a table, have a voice in this Chamber and a choice in the future of this nation.

We cannot just allocate seats for youth in Parliament only, but rather we should have a pathway that builds them, and I thank the honourable House, for having the mock Youth Parliament. It has been a success, and I see those young leaders doing well in other conferences and sectors, and they are really speaking up for their people and what they believe is incorrect.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need more youth councils, seats at the table of national development planning, workshops and sector conferences. We need advisory boards, a Standing Youth Advisory Board to the Prime Minister and the Cabinet as well. We again need to continue investing in agri-tech and value-adding, climate and blue economy and GovTech to ensure young talent is brought in to modernise and digitise public services and clear the backlogs of files.

Young people must not be represented in this Parliament as decoration, not as photographs or as a brochure, but as decision makers with a real seat, real voice and real work to do. As I say this for Parliament, it also would reflect to a party as well, that young people are not just there as decorations or photographs, because the young generation are not merely the leaders of tomorrow, they are the energy, the innovation and the ideas of today. A nation that sidelines its youth, is a nation borrowing against its own future.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to talk about the interest of youth in national governance, politics and voting. I would like to tell the younger generation that your vote, your choice is your power. Every road, every school, every hospital, every dollar in this Budget begins with the ballot in your hands. Use it wisely. Vote for competence, vote for character, vote for leadership that delivers innovation, ideas and real prosperity. And when you look into the mirror, I want you to see the leader that you can become and represent this nation and do a better job than all of us with time to come.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those are my last few words. I would like to thank the Ministry of Finance, Mr. Shiri and the entire team, FRCS, Leader of Opposition, thank you, Sir, for allowing me the freedom to work and the supporting of all the issues that I raise, and to the whole of Government as well, disagreeing with policies is one thing, but mutual respect should always be maintained across the floor, and on that note, I do not support this Budget. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I think we will take a break. We will now suspend proceedings for our morning tea and Parliament will resume in half an hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.57 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.31 a.m.

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen and fellow Fijians; a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to commend the honourable Minister for Finance and his dedicated team led by the Permanent Secretary, Mr. Shiri Gounder, for preparing and presenting a comprehensive, well-considered and forward-looking 2026-2027 National Budget. The Budget reflects a clear understanding of Fiji's current economic realities while responding to the aspirations and the needs of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, sound economic principles recognise that during periods of economic uncertainty or slower growth, governments have an important role to play in stimulating economic activity through strategic public investment and expenditure. Such investment supports demand, creates employment opportunities, strengthens business confidence and lays the foundation for sustained economic development.

This Government has adopted exactly that approach. It has chosen to invest in our people, strengthen essential public services and support key sectors of the economy rather than retreat from its responsibilities. We cannot compromise on the delivery of essential services to our people.

Access to healthcare, education, infrastructure, social protection and economic opportunities must remain at the centre of our national priorities. This Budget demonstrates the Government's commitment to ensuring that every Fijian continues to benefit from effective and reliable public services while we build a stronger, more resilient, and more inclusive economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Commerce and Business Development sits at the very heart of our nation's economic life. Our mandate is broad, and it touches the daily lives of every citizen and every business in this country.

Through our Economic, Business Reforms and Investment Unit, we lead strategic reform initiatives.

Our Department of National Trade Measurement and Standards protects every consumer in this country from unsafe and poor-quality products, while maintaining the national system of weights and measures that underpins fair trade.

Our Department of Co-operative Business nurtures the co-operative movement that has, for generations, given our people a pathway to collective enterprise and shared prosperity.

Our MSME Fiji Unit walks alongside our small businesses, the entrepreneurs and market vendors, who are the true engine of grassroots economic growth, providing them with training, advisory support and, for the first time, access to a peer-to-peer lending platform to unlock new fundraising opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in short, this Ministry is where policy meets enterprise. We are the bridge between the Government's ambition and the lived economic reality of our traders, our co-operators, our investors and our consumers.

Since 2022, MSME Fiji has continued to deliver our core programmes. Over the three-year period from 2022-2025, the MSME Unit was allocated \$7.6 million, and through this allocation has

assisted over 2,100 recipients. During the same period, the team conducted 111 training sessions, reaching more than 2,500 participants, of whom 1,937 were women. This is a clear demonstration, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of this Government's commitment to inclusive women-driven economic growth at the grassroots level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in December 2025, the Ministry launched the 2025-2030 MSME Strategic Plan, which will guide the next phase of development in Fiji's MSME ecosystem. In the same month, we launched the MSME Portal, giving our micro, small, and medium enterprises online access to the MSME Fiji's grant programme. This Portal marks the first phase in the development of Fiji's national MSME Database - a central repository of MSME information that will sharpen how Government changes, designs, and targets its support to.

The Department of Cooperative Business has, likewise, seen steady growth. The Cooperative Development Fund commenced in the 2024 financial year with a budget of \$400,000. In its second year, the Government increased the budget to \$600,000, reflecting growing demand and the confidence this sector has earned.

The recent registration of new cooperatives continues on an upward trend, a sign that more of our people are choosing the cooperative model as a pathway into business. Government has also invested in the renovation of the Cooperative College, ensuring our co-operators have a fit-for-purpose institution to build the skills this growing sector demands. When the Government came into power, we had fewer than 300 active cooperatives in Fiji and now, we can proudly say that we have over 800 active cooperatives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are not simply figures - they represent thousands of Fijians who have received training, funding and mentorship to start and grow a business, and who now stand as testament to the difference targeted and well-monitored Government support can make.

As we move into the 2026-2027 financial year, the Ministry remains committed to building on this foundation, deepening the reach of our grant programmes, strengthening our co-operative sector, and ensuring every dollar allocated continues to deliver reasonable impact for our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are what this Government has achieved. Despite constraints, the Ministry has pressed ahead with reform, recognising that the cost of inaction is always higher than the cost of change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the key objectives of the Ministry of Commerce and Business Development is to build a vibrant, resilient and sustainable co-operative movement in Fiji. Co-operatives have long played an important role in empowering ordinary Fijians by allowing communities and producers to pool resources, improve bargaining power, create employment and retain wealth within the local communities. For Fiji, co-operatives are not merely another business model - they are part of our economic history. They represent the values of collective ownership, shared prosperity and community development.

This Budget continues our commitment to strengthening this important sector through legislative reform, improved governance, capacity building and greater access to finance. However, if we are serious about rebuilding confidence in the co-operative movement, we must also be prepared to acknowledge and address the injustices that were committed against co-operatives in the past. One of the most significant examples is the restructuring of the Rewa Co-operative Dairy Company Limited in 2010.

The Rewa Co-operative Dairy Company Limited was not simply another government-owned

enterprise – it was not. It was a co-operative owned by the dairy farmers from Tailevu, Rewa and Naitasiri. These farmers had collectively built one of the most successful agricultural co-operatives in Fiji. The Co-operative owned and operated a fully functional dairy processing plant in Nabua. It maintained an extensive milk collection network, provided logistics support, and served as the backbone of Fiji's dairy industry for many years.

As the legal owners of the co-operative, the farmers had every right to determine the future direction of their organisation. Any major restructuring of the co-operative should have been undertaken only with the proper authority of its shareholders and in accordance with sound co-operative governance principles. Instead, in 2010, the co-operative was restructured into two separate entities by the then government.

The first entity was Fiji Dairy Limited, which took ownership of the processing factory. The Government subsequently sold this company to Southern Cross Foods, a subsidiary of CJ Patel Group. While the sale itself forms part of Fiji's corporate history, there remains legitimate questions about how the restructuring occurred and whether the assets of the Co-operative's shareholders were adequately protected throughout that process.

The second entity created was Fiji Co-operative Dairy Company Limited. Its primary role became representing dairy farmers in upstream production and acting as an intermediary between the farmers and Fiji Dairy Limited.

The farmers were assured that they would continue to participate in the ownership of the processing company. However, what they ultimately received was a 20 percent holding of Class B shares. These shares did not provide them with the level of ownership, voting rights, or influence that would ordinarily be expected by those whose co-operative had originally owned the processing assets. Many dairy farmers continue to believe that they were unfairly disadvantaged during the restructuring process.

I believe that these concerns deserve careful and objective consideration. This is not about revisiting history for political purposes - this is about ensuring that justice, transparency and accountability remain central principles of good governance. As a government that has committed itself to openness and accountability, we have the responsibility to fully understand how this restructuring occurred and whether the interests of the Co-operative members were properly protected. Among the important questions that deserve to be examined are:

- Under what legal authority was the restructuring of the Cooperative undertaken?
- Were the shareholders properly consulted, and did they provide informed consent?
- What governance processes were followed during the restructuring?
- How was the consultant responsible for the restructuring appointed, particularly if there was any conflict of interest that existed?
- Why was the ownership of the processing factory transferred away from the Co-operative members?
- Why were the farmers ultimately issued only Class B shares with limited influence?
- What became of the proceeds from the sale of Fiji Dairy Limited, and why were these proceeds not returned to the Co-operative that rightfully had owned the processing assets?

Those are legitimate questions that deserve factual answers based on evidence and proper review.

More importantly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our responsibility cannot stop by examining the past. Our focus must also be on rebuilding the future of Fiji's dairy industry. For many years, Fiji has sought to

increase domestic milk production and reduce dependence on imported dairy products. Strengthening our dairy farmers remains essential if we are to improve food security, create employment, and reduce our import bill.

Accordingly, Government should look work closely with dairy farmers, the Fiji Co-operative Dairy Company Limited and all relevant stakeholders closely with dairy farmers, the Fiji Co-operative Dairy Company Limited and all relevant stakeholders to explore practical options for rebuilding the industry's long-term capacity. These options could include undertaking an independent assessment of whether there is any realistic pathway for increasing farmer participation in the ownership of dairy processing facilities.

Government may also evaluate the feasibility of establishing modern processing infrastructure that provides dairy farmers with greater commercial participation in value addition. In addition, consideration should be given to targeted fiscal measures that strengthen farmer-owned co-operative enterprises.

One proposal that deserves careful economic assessment is whether appropriate duty concessions should be extended to Fiji Co-operative Dairy Company Limited to facilitate the importation and distribution of processed dairy products, with profits reinvested directly into expanding milk production, improving farm productivity, strengthening collection systems and supporting farmer development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government has contributed the highest development fund towards the dairy industry, reaching as far as \$5 million, and no government has ever done that before. Such proposals would naturally require detailed financial, commercial, and legal evaluation to ensure that they are economically sustainable, consistent with Government's policy, and this will take time.

As a way forward, the Government could consider referring the determination of a fair and sustainable raw milk price to the Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission (FCCC). An independent assessment by the FCCC would help ensure that pricing is transparent, evidence-based, and equitable to all stakeholders in the dairy industry. This avenue could be pursued should the dairy farmers choose to support such an option.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our objective should not simply be to preserve the past - our objective should be to restore confidence, to ensure fairness, to restore opportunity, and above all, to restore the original spirit of co-operation that enables Fiji's dairy farmers to build one of the country's most successful agricultural enterprises. If we genuinely believe in empowering ordinary Fijians, then empowering our co-operatives must form part of the national vision.

This Budget gives us an opportunity not only to invest in businesses, industries, and infrastructure, but also to invest in fairness, accountability, and rebuilding of institutions that place ownership back into the hands of our people.

I commend the Ministry's ongoing commitment to strengthening Fiji's cooperative sector and encourage Government to continue exploring practical avenues that ensure that our dairy farmers receive the recognition, support and opportunities they deserve.

Looking ahead, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Ministry's plans for 2026-2027 are ambitious but achievable. We will continue to implement the Fiji National E-Commerce Strategy, helping our MSMEs participate confidently in online markets, while strengthening digital governance and cybersecurity.

We will advance work on the National Single Window, a transformative trade facilitation reform that will allow traders to submit all trade-related information through a single electronic platform, reducing duplication, lowering compliance costs, and accelerating border clearance.

We will continue to roll out the Fijian Made and Buy Fijian Campaign to champion local enterprise, undertake a review of the Cooperatives Act 1996 and the National and Trade Measurement Act 1989 to modernise our regulatory frameworks and continue Doing Business Reforms to make Fiji a more attractive and easier place in which to start and grow a business.

The Ministry of Commerce and Business Development remains firmly committed to building an economy that works for every Fijian, from the smallest market vendor to the largest investor. The \$27.3 million allocated to this Ministry in the 2026-2027 Budget is not merely a sum on a piece of paper - it is an investment in resilience, competitiveness and future prosperity of the business community. This allocation, confirmed in the National Budget, reflects the Government's broader strategy of growing revenue through economic expansion, not through high-value taxes, but recognise the thriving private sector as the foundation of a sustainable financial future for Fiji.

Some have called our National Budget a joke - it is not a joke. A lot of people have put their time, money and effort into consolidating this, including staff of the Ministry of Finance led by the Permanent Secretary, the honourable Minister for Finance and other stakeholders. The people of Fiji have contributed towards building this Budget, so it should not be called a joke. It is an insult to the hard work of our people. Due to recognition, they can say that the Budget does not provide holistic coverage, but it should never be called a joke. We are insulting our civil servants. I think all the honourable Members who have said that should recall their statement.

With that contribution, I commend this Budget to Parliament. I thank you, Mr. Speaker and honourable Members, for your attention and support.

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise in this august House to offer my full support for the 2026-2027 National Budget, presented by the honourable Minister for Finance, Commerce and Business Development. This is the fourth time I am offering my support for the National Budget since entering Parliament in December 2022. I do so with a deep sense of conviction and trust that with the able leadership of our honourable Prime Minister, we are moving in the right direction.

I do not understand why the critique about the Budget is coming from the other side of the House when everything is running smoothly in our beloved Fiji. Last week, I was in Nadarivatu with the honourable Prime Minister, who was the chief guest at the commissioning of the newly refurbished District Officer's office and quarters where he received overwhelming support and accolades from the chiefs and the people of the five *yavusa* in Colo North. They were saying that we are moving in the right direction. So, if you are criticising the Budget under his leadership, please, go down to the people in the rural and maritime areas and witness it for yourself the support that this Government is receiving, especially from the people who dwell in the rural and maritime areas.

I join the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development in commending the honourable Minister for Finance for presenting a disciplined and a forward-looking Budget under the theme, "A Responsible Budget for a Sustainable Future." This Budget recognises the fiscal constraints facing our nation, while continuing to protect essential services and direct available resources towards programmes that will produce practical and lasting themes for our people.

The Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Risk Management has been

allocated \$35.4 million in the 2026-2027 financial year. This allocation includes approximately \$15.95 million for operating expenditure and \$19.45 million for our capital investment. Our responsibility now is to convert this allocation into tangible results for rural and maritime communities. The Ministry will, therefore, implement its budget through five important principles:

- (1) ensuring that projects are properly prepared before implementation;
- (2) commencing procurement early in the financial year;
- (3) strengthening the divisional and district-level delivery;
- (4) engaging communities throughout project implementation; and
- (5) closely monitoring both financial and physical progress.

At the beginning of the financial year, every funded programme will be supported by an approved annual workplan, procurement schedule, cash flow forecast, implementation timeline and clearly assigned responsibility. Priority will be given to technically ready projects so that implementation is not unnecessarily concentrated towards the end of the financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Divisional Commissioners, Provincial Administrators, District Officers and Assistant District Officers will remain central to implementation. They will coordinate consultations, verify community priorities, monitor contractors' performance, identify implementation risks and provide regular progress reports. Communities will also be engaged from project identification through to completion and handover. This is important because community ownership strengthens accountability and the long-term sustainability of Government investments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Community Access Roads, Footpaths and Footbridges Programmes, commonly known as CARFF, has been allocated \$3 million, which is an increase of approximately \$750,000. The Ministry is targeting around 60 projects across the four Divisions. Priority will be given to communities where poor access affects school attendance, medical referrals, agricultural production, access to markets and safe movement during emergencies. Each project will undergo community verification, technical assessment and transparent prioritisation before work begins.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Self-Help Programme has been allocated \$1.3 million, which is an increase of approximately \$322,000, and intends to support around 50 community projects, as well as promote partnership between Government and communities and encourage communities to contribute labour, materials, or other resources towards projects that they have identified as priorities. The funding will support critical infrastructure, including community facilities, small water systems, and other initiatives that improve living conditions and strengthen community ownership.

The Rural High-Risk Water and Sanitation (HRWS) Programme receives approximately \$684,783, with around 30 projects expected to be implemented. The Ministry will prioritise communities facing unsafe water sources and inadequate sanitation. Project designs will consider water quality, accessibility for persons with disabilities, environmental sustainability and arrangements for ongoing maintenance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Seafaring Entrepreneurial Assistance (SEA) Programme receives approximately \$293,478, targeting around 30 projects. The Programme will support eligible maritime entrepreneurs engaged in transport, fisheries, inter-island trade and other livelihood activities. However, the Ministry will not only distribute assistance - we will strengthen beneficiary screening, provide business guidance and conduct post-assistance monitoring. This will help ensure that public investment contributes to sustainable businesses, employment, food security, and economic activity in maritime communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Rural and Outer Island Development (ROI) Programme is allocated approximately \$2.93 million. This Programme will increasingly focus on rural economic transformation. Investment will support productive infrastructure, processing facilities, cooling and storage facilities, value chain development and resource-based sectors such as agriculture, fisheries, forestry, et cetera. The Ministry will also work closely with sector Ministries, cooperatives, financial institutions and the private sector to identify investments that increase production, reduce post-harvest losses, strengthen market access and create employment within our Provinces and districts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Rural Housing Assistance Programme is also allocated approximately \$2.93 million with around 90 housing projects targeted. Priority will be given to vulnerable households, particularly elderly persons, persons with disabilities, low-income families and those living in unsafe housing conditions. The Ministry will strengthen beneficiary verification, material management, construction supervision and certification. Given the significant number of applications, assistance will be prioritised transparently according to vulnerability, housing condition and project readiness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the allocation of Emergency Water Supplies has been increased to \$600,000. This will support water carting, water tanks, fittings and other emergency interventions for communities, schools and health facilities affected by drought or major disruption. Divisional teams will maintain updated information on vulnerable communities and available water sources, so that assistance can be mobilised quickly and fairly.

On the National Rural Development Policy, the Budget will also support the Ministry's Change Management Programme and the continued development of the National Rural Development Policy (NRDP). This new NRDP is intended to move rural development away from fragmented project-by-project interventions, towards an integrated place-based and results-focused system.

During the financial year, the Ministry will complete the necessary policy consultations and technical work, consolidate provincial and divisional priorities and clarify the roles of ministries, local institutions, communities, the private sector and development partners. The \$200,000 provision for consultations and promotions under General Administration will help support structured engagement, policy coordination and stakeholder participation, alongside normal Ministry operating resources.

The NRDP Work Programme will include the development of an implementation framework with clear outcomes, responsibilities, financing arrangements and monitoring indicators. It will promote stronger alignment between national policies, divisional plans, provisional priorities and the community needs. The Ministry will also strengthen co-ordination with the iTaukei administration, advisory councils and sector ministries so that communities receive integrated solutions rather than separate and disconnected projects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, rural development must be supported by reliable evidence. The Ministry will, therefore, strengthen community profiling, geographic information system, rural databases and project information. This will help Government identify service gaps, map vulnerable populations, prioritise investment and measure whether development is reducing inequality between urban, rural and maritime areas.

Most importantly, the NRDP will connect policy with implementation of existing programmes such as ROI, CARFF, Self-Help, rural housing, water and sanitation, and will become practical delivery instruments for wider rural transformation. This means that every road, water system, housing project or livelihood investment should contribute to broader provincial development, resilience and economic opportunity.

On the whole of Government support for rural development, Mr. Speaker, Sir, rural development cannot be delivered by one Ministry alone. I, therefore, acknowledge the allocations provided to other Ministries and agencies, whose investments will complement the programmes for our Ministry.

The Ministry of Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport has been allocated approximately \$821 million. With that allocation, Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) receives around \$370 million, including \$26 million for new sealing and upgrading of community and rural roads. Government is also progressing the upgrading of approximately 82 kilometres of rural roads and 22 bridges. These investments will connect rural communities to schools, health facilities, markets, farms and essential Government services.

I also welcome the \$10.5 million provided to the Water Authority of Fiji to maintain and expand rural water supply. This complements our Ministry's high-risk water, sanitation and emergency water programmes. Better coordination between our agencies will reduce duplication, close service gaps and improve the reliability and resilience of rural water systems.

The health sector allocation will support the upgrading and rebuilding of primary healthcare facilities in rural and maritime areas, including facilities at Kabara, Tukavesi and Balevuto. Digital connectivity for primary healthcare facilities will also improve communication, referrals and access to essential medical services.

Allocations to agriculture, fisheries and forestry are equally important. Agriculture funding will support extensive services, mechanisation, farm access roads, markets and export production. Fisheries funding will support aquaculture, seaweed farming, ice plants and fisheries stations. Forestry funding will support rural and maritime forestry development, including maritime resources and associated infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these should not be viewed as separate investments. Roads must connect productive farms to markets. Jetties must support fisheries, forestry and inter-island trade. Water systems must serve homes, schools, health facilities. Telecommunications must connect communities to information, financial services and Government assistance.

On National Disaster Risk Management Office (NDRMO) Preparedness, Response and Resilience, the NDRMO will implement its activities in accordance with the National Disaster Risk Management Act 2024 and the National Disaster Risk Reduction Policy. The focus will be on shifting from a predominantly reactive approach towards prevention, preparedness, anticipatory action, coordinated response and resilient recovery.

A total of \$2.2 million has been allocated for the construction and the retrofitting of evacuation centres, with approximately 50 projects across the four Divisions. Projects will be selected through risk-based prioritisation and technical assessment. The Ministry will also work with communities and relevant technical agencies to ensure that evacuation centres are structurally safe, accessible, inclusive and supported by basic amenities and appropriate management arrangements.

The NDRMO also receives \$225,000 for Disaster Risk Reduction Support, targeting approximately 11 community projects. This funding will address urgent risk reduction needs, particularly where smaller interventions can reduce exposure to hazards and protect lives, homes and essential services.

Approximately \$253,135 is provided for the repair and maintenance of operational emergency equipment. The Ministry will maintain an updated equipment register, preventive maintenance

schedule and regular readiness checks. Emergency equipment must be functional before a disaster occurs, not repaired after it is needed. The allocation of \$194,400 for NDRMO operational mobility vessel will support the completion of this important capability.

The NDRMO operating programme will also support training, public awareness, coordination meetings and national readiness exercises. It requires participation by line Ministries, the Disciplined Forces, provincial and municipal institutions, civil society, faith-based organisations, the private sector, development partners and communities. Our objective is to ensure that responsibilities are understood before a disaster, coordination is effective during an emergency and recovery assistance is accountable after an event.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, successful implementation will not be judged only by the amount of money spent - it will be judged by the number of projects completed and the quality of infrastructure delivered, the number of people assisted, and the improvements experienced by communities.

In conclusion, this Budget provides the Ministry with a realistic platform to deliver targeted rural development, strengthen disaster preparedness and support the transformation of rural and maritime communities. It balances fiscal responsibility with investments that protect lives, reduce vulnerability, improves access and create economic opportunity.

As Assistant Minister, I will support my honourable Minister and the Permanent Secretary in maintaining close oversight of implementation. We will work to ensure that geography does not limit opportunity, that vulnerability does not become a permanent disadvantage, and that every public investment contributes towards a safer, more resilient and more inclusive Fiji.

I commend the 2026-2027 National Budget to this august House and reaffirm the Ministry's commitment to a responsible, transparent and results-driven implementation.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Members, *bula vinaka, namaste* and good afternoon.

I rise today with one duty only, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to speak for the people of Fiji who cannot stand in this Chamber themselves - the mother counting coins at the counter, the father choosing between food and fuel, the student who was told that the money has run out, the farmer breaking his vehicle on the broken roads, Sir, they pay for this Parliament - every light in this Chamber and every salary paid to every one of us comes from their pocket. Today, I speak for them, and I will not soften a single word.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is Government's confession. It tells the nation in black and white who a government really works for. This Budget confesses everything, it confesses a government that –

- has lost control of the nation's money;
- preaches sacrifice to the people while sacrificing nothing itself; and
- has run out of ideas and is now simply running out the clock to the next election.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Coalition Government has had nearly four full years of promises, press conferences and excuses. As we head towards the general election, every household in Fiji is asking the same simple question; are we better off today than we were four years ago?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, ask the parent paying school levies for the so-called free education, the teacher waiting months for a reply from his or her own Ministry, the student whose scholarship

vanished, or the family in Taveuni who watched the shelves go empty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fijians already know the answer. That is why this Government is nervous. That is why this Budget is dressed up in uncertainty. The record cannot speak for itself, so the spin must. A billion-dollar deficit is not responsibility - it is reckless.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they call this a 'responsible Budget'. Let us test that word against the numbers because the numbers do not lie, even if governments do. This Budget carries a deficit of more than \$1 billion - the largest in our history.

When this Government took office, our national debt stood around \$9 billion. Today, it has climbed to somewhere around \$11.7 billion, and mind you, it is still climbing. Here is the part the people will never forget - before the Elections, members of the People's Alliance Party stood on every stage in this country crying about debt. They asked with trembling voices, who will pay these debts? They answered, "our children".

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those same political party members, some of them are now sitting on Government benches, have piled billions more onto the very children they claim to weep for. That is not responsibility, that is saying one thing to win votes and doing the opposite when in power.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the people want to know what this government's word is worth, they only need a few examples. On 5th May, 2023, the honourable Prime Minister publicly said that raising debt to 15 percent would be too high. Families breathed a sigh of relief. Then only months later, the very same Government raised debt to 15 percent and later reduced to 12.5 percent after Fijians suffered.

The former Prime Minister, Mr. Frank Bainimarama, kept debt at 9 percent because he understood that ordinary families were hurting. This Government reversed that and every single trip to the supermarket since then reminds families that this Government's decisions reach into their pockets. They announced assistance with one hand and took more with the other. Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is not relief, that is a trick played with the people's own money.

Let us not forget the recent fuel price increase. On 18th March, the honourable Prime Minister assured the nation that there would be no fuel price hike. The honourable Minister for Finance then reinforced that assurance, stating that there would be no increase before May. Yet, on 1st April, ironically, the day the world knows as April Fool's Day, the price of fuel went up. Mr. Speaker, Sir, one cannot help but ask, who was truly misled on that day? The people who trusted their government's assurances or those who made promises they cannot keep?

The Australian Government provided AUD30 million in assistance to Fiji's response to the fuel crisis matter. Instead of using those funds to provide direct relief to struggling families, like how the FijiFirst did during COVID with the \$360 assistance, the Coalition Government absorbed the money into their own budget to fund its own spending priorities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, every household in Fiji knows what to do when times are hard. You tighten your belt, you cut what you can, you go without, so that your children can eat and go to school. That is what the people of Fiji have been doing,

What has this Government done at the same time? It has grown fatter - a bloated Cabinet and Ministries doing the same jobs twice. Endless travel, consultants, allowances and perks, all paid for by the taxpayers who are told time and again that money is tight. Money is only ever tight, it seems, when people are asking. When Ministers are asking, they get big budgets, like the \$1 billion deficit

we can see. A responsible budget does not start by demanding sacrifices from taxpayers - it starts when Government sacrifices first. This Government has never once led by example, and this Budget proves that it has no plans to start now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the recent National Economic Summit (NES) hosted by Dialogue Fiji, attended by citizens, experts, even Government Members of Parliament (MPs) who are sitting on the other side and the former Minister for Economy, Mr. Aiyaz Sayed Khaiyum, the people spoke honestly about the struggles of Fijians. The honourable Prime Minister himself told the media afterward that the Government now understood what the people were saying and would plan better. So, I searched through this Budget for proof. Where are the bold measures on cost of living? Where are the cuts to Government's own expenses? Where is the one single reform the people actually asked for? Nowhere, Mr. Speaker, Sir! The listening was only for the cameras. The Budget is only for this Government and themselves. The people are not asking for miracles, they are asking to be heard, and this Government has answered them with silence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no nation has ever educated its way into poverty, but plenty have neglected education and paid dearly for it. This Government boasts of free education, yet parents across Fiji are being asked for levies and contributions they cannot refuse. Free education that families keep paying for is not free, Sir, it is false promise paid by struggling parents.

The teachers, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the very people building the nation's future, my office has been flooded with their complaints - salary upgrades unresolved for months; appointments, transfers and promotions delayed; teachers covering for shortages while their own Minister and Ministry cannot even answer their letters. They write, they call and they wait. A government that ignores teachers have no right to lecture anyone about the future.

Then came the announcement that crushed thousands of dreams - Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service scholarships for Semester 2 and Quarter 3 fully exhausted. Young Fijians who studied hard, earned their places, did everything right, were told there is nothing left for them. Do they give up their dreams, honourable Prime Minister? Do their parents borrow money they cannot repay? The Government has no answer.

Under the previous administration, scholarships and student loans worked together, so no capable young Fijian was locked out of education by poverty. That safety net has been torn down by this very same government that promised to continue. When students raised how small their allowances were after the 25 percent distribution, the honourable Finance Minister brushed it off and said that that was just assistance. Mind you, honourable Minister, students pay rent. They pay bus fares, food and textbooks. It is very easy to say "just assistance" from an air-conditioned office. It is much harder to say it on the face of a student choosing between groceries and rent. That one phrase tells the nation exactly how far this Government has drifted from the people it came to serve.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the largest allocations in this Budget goes to the Ministry for Public Works, yet the Savusavu-Labasa Highway and roads of Taveuni remain an obstacle course. Motorists pay hundreds, sometimes thousands, repairing suspensions and tyres and many more. Farmers pay more to move their produce and every one of those lands on the consumers' plates.

Bad roads are not just nuisance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are a hidden tax on the cost of living, and this is not just the Northern Division. The Central, Western and Easter Divisions tell the same story. Budgets rise every year, the potholes remain. Taxpayers who faithfully pay the road levy deserve to see on the road beneath their wheels, not swallowed by the Ministry that delivers press releases instead of tarsealed roads.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when Taveuni's shipping lifeline broke down, what did this Government do? It waited. For over a week, fuel ran low, businesses shut, produce rotted. Government moved only after the Opposition MPs and the people of Taveuni roared on social media. A government that acted only when shamed is not into governing - it is reacting.

The same story haunts our hospitals. Medicine shortages. Ambulances that never come. I am sure the Assistant Minister for Health is here. He can acknowledge this - endless waiting time, exhausted health workers carrying this nation on their backs. They deserve more than applause. You may be laughing, but this is the truth. They deserve proper resources. This Budget offers them words.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us come to something that we found in this Budget - the \$3.3 million grant to the media. In the same Budget that tell students that money has run out, this Government funds \$3.3 million in grant for media organisations and more for its parade of commissions. Does the Australian Government subsidise Channel 9 and 10 and other media organisations? No! Why are we giving private media organisations grants?

The Constitutional Review Commission, Electoral Review, Truth and Reconciliation Commissioners, secretariat, travel allowances, venues, all on taxpayers' money. All on the eve of an election. All producing reports that may never see the daylight.

I support free press, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I support a genuine reform, but when families cannot afford groceries, these are not priorities. They are luxuries for the Government. Budgets are about choices and this Government has chosen itself, again. Meanwhile, big and highly profitable companies, like Fiji Water, continues to enjoy generous tax break while ordinary Fijians carry 12.5 percent VAT. That is not fiscal policy, that is favouritism.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to respond to the former Minister for Climate Change. I carefully listened to his speech yesterday. He tells this House that the Opposition is confused, singing different tunes and does not know whether it is coming or going. That is a rather interesting observation coming from an honourable Member who was elected on one side of the House and is now comfortably seated on the other. I wish he was here to listen to my speech. If anyone is qualified to speak about changing tunes, surely, it is this honourable Member. He has sung from both hymn boxes. He speaks about cheap political point scoring.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, I think you will cease from referring to him because he is not here. I think the rule states very clearly.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge that he is not present. I shall make it in general terms that the honourable Member needs to be careful when he is attacking the Opposition because he was in Opposition for the past eight years, and I look forward to having him come back to the Opposition in the next election.

However, the Government may laugh at our questions today, but the people outside this Chamber are asking exactly the same questions everyday. They ask why groceries and fuel costs are more. They ask why electricity, transport and school expenses continue to rise. Those are not Opposition questions. Those are peoples' questions. Before any honourable Member accuses this side of confusion, perhaps they should first reflect on their own political journey. It is difficult to accuse others of changing tunes when some honourable Members have changed the entire band.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, unlike some honourable Members and politicians around, we have remained where the people have placed us. We continue to stand with the taxpayers, with struggling families, farmers, students, and with Fijians who expect us, expect this Government to be held accountable.

That is not confusion, honourable Members, that is democracy that you also preach.

As I conclude, a budget is not judged by the applause on a budget day, but by the lives it changes afterwards. By that measure, this Government has already been judged, at the checkout counter, at the fuel pump, at the school office, at the hospital, and on every broken road in this country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my message to every Fijian is simple - remember who promised and who delivered. Remember who sacrificed and who was asked to. This Chamber belongs to you, this Budget was paid for by you, and very soon the verdict will be delivered by you. The verdict on the Budget belongs to the people, and I think we all can see what the people are really wanting – the everyday Fijians, who are the backbone of this country, and who pay us to represent their interests. A message to the Government from the people, *da vuni, da leve, da dro*, and the people are concluding, *keimami sa kida*.

With those words, may God bless every Fijian who is struggling. May God bless our honourable Members in the Opposition and on the Government side as this is our last budget, it seems. I acknowledge the staff who prepared this Budget but, unfortunately, I do not support the motion.

HON. RATU. J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and fellow Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; I warmly greet you all this afternoon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I respond to the 2026-2027 National Budget, I wish to pay tribute to a young public servant who has passed away and who has deeply saddened the Ministry of Justice family.

Last week, the Ministry bid a heartfelt farewell to our beloved colleague, 27-year-old Peni Bulikula Galuvakadua, a valued member of the Official Receiver's Office, whose life of 27 years was so brief, left a lasting impression on all who had the privilege of knowing him. On behalf of the Ministry of Justice, I extend our deepest condolences to Peni's mother, his siblings and the entire Galuvakadua family - *vinaka vakalevu na veisusu vinaka*. While we mourn his passing, may his memory continue to inspire us all to serve our people with the same kindness, integrity and dedication that he demonstrated each day.

I rise to present my contribution to the Budget with a spirit of responsibility, vision and service to our nation. This Budget is designed to strengthen our economy, support families, improve public service and create opportunities for every citizen.

We recognise the challenges many people face and are committed to using public resources wisely and fairly. Our goal is not only to manage today's needs, but to build a stronger future for our children and grandchildren. As the *Bible* reminds us in the Book of Proverbs 1:5, and I quote: "The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty."

This verse calls us to careful planning, wise stewardship and disciplined action in shaping our national financial future and this is what this budget does. At first glance, some may focus on the reduction itself, however, good governance is not measured by the size of the budget, but by the results that are achieved through the responsible stewardship of public resources.

This Budget reflects the Government's commitment to physical discipline, sustainable public

finances and ensuring that every dollar entrusted to us by the people of Fiji delivers maximum value. In a global environment marked by economic uncertainty and competing demands on public finances, responsible governments must make difficult choices. This Government has demonstrated the courage to do so while continuing to protect critical services and strategic national priorities. As Assistant Minister for Justice, I view this budget not as a constraint, but as an opportunity to strengthen the culture of our efficiency and accountability within public service. Ably led by our Permanent Secretary and our senior managers, I have no doubt that we will be more efficient, dynamic and strengthen our accountability and processes for our ministry.

The reality is that the expectations of our people continue to grow. Citizens expect Government services that are faster, more accessible, more transparent and more responsive. Meeting those expectations is not simply a question of spending more money, rather, it is about working smarter, embracing innovation, improving systems and ensuring that public institutions are focused on outcomes. This budget reinforces an important principle that a modern and capable civil service must continuously seek ways to do more with less, eliminate inefficiencies, improve processes and direct resources towards the areas that deliver the greatest impact for our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the Ministry's overall allocation has been reduced, Government has deliberately protected funding in areas that support long-term institutional strengthening and justice sector reforms, in the following ways:

- SEG1 Established Staff - Allocation has reduced by 1.7 percent to \$4,608,513. This adjustment is largely attributed to the Government's decision to reduce the employer contribution to the Fiji National Provident Fund by 2 percent.
- SEG 2 Wage earners – Allocation has reduced by 1.3 percent to \$305,035, reflecting the corresponding reduction in the Government's employer FNPf contribution for wage earners.
- SEG 3 Travel and Communications – Allocation has been reduced by 7.5 percent. This reflects the Ministry's continued commitment to ensuring that Government resources are utilised efficiently, while maintaining effective service delivery across the country.
- SEG 4 Maintenance and Operations – Allocation has been reduced by 14 percent. These savings demonstrate our commitment to prudent financial management and ensuring that every public dollar delivers value for money. This is a disciplined budget, not a diminished one. It protects co-staffing, preserves essential operations and direct resources to where they are most needed. While several expenditure categories have been carefully managed, the Government continues to invest in initiatives that directly improve access to justice.
- SEG 5 Purchase of Goods and Services – Pleased to note that allocation has increased to support the establishment of a new Ministry of Justice office in Nakasi. An additional \$74,000 has been allocated for this important initiative. The Nakasi corridor continues to experience rapid population growth, and the establishment of this office will bring essential justice services closer to thousands of residents in Nakasi and surrounding communities. It reflects our commitment to ensuring that Government services are accessible, responsive and centred on the needs of the people.
- SEG 6 Operating Grants and Transfers - Allocation has reduced by approximately 40 percent primarily due to adjustments made to the allocation for Justice of the Peace allowances. We have begun cleaning our data and reminding our JPs that their critical role in the community must be reflected by submitting their reports on time and updating their information with our

office. Only those JPs, whether civil servants or non-civil servants, will be paid the allowances when they submit their paperwork in a timely manner. The Ministry will continue expanding the training and deployment of Justices of the Peace, particularly in rural, remote and maritime communities, where access to legal and Government services can often be limited. Their work in witnessing documents, certifying copies and providing essential services ensures that justice remains accessible throughout Fiji.

- SEG 7 Special Expenditures - Funding has been rationalised but remains sufficient to support the Ministry's reform agenda, including digitisation, legislative administration and parole-related functions. Although the Ministry is operating with a constrained physical environment, this budget provides the resources necessary to continue implementing key reforms, modernising services and strengthening the administration of justice throughout Fiji.

Importantly, Government has continued to invest in the Ministry's digitisation programme with an allocation of \$400,000. This is more than an expenditure item; it is a continuation of a partial investment in efficiency. Digitisation reduces delays, improves record management, enhances transparency, strengthens public confidence and allows the ministry to deliver better services at lower administrative costs over time. These are precisely the kinds of reforms that enable Government to become learner, more efficient and more responsive to the needs of our people. We will start with this \$400,000, complete activities, set against it, strategise and identify ways to continue to attract investment in this critical yet ongoing priority area.

Mr Speaker, Sir, particularly significant is the continued funding of the implementation of the administration of justice programme. Although operating with a constrained physical environment, Government has retained \$300,000 for this very critical initiative because justice reform cannot be placed on hold. The administration of justice is one of the fundamental responsibilities of the State. It requires continuous investment in legislative reform, modern legal frameworks, improved systems, and stronger institution.

Through this programme, the Ministry will continue advancing key reform designs to ensure that our justice system remains efficient, accessible, transparent and fit for purpose in our rapidly changing world. This reflects a government that is not merely managing today's challenges but investing in the foundation of tomorrow's success.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what this Budget demonstrates is that physical responsibility and effective public service delivery are not competing objectives. They are complementary objectives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to speak in the vernacular.

Turaga Saka na Speaker, au tucake saka meu vakaraitaka na noqu rai me baleta na i tuvatuva vaka i lavo ni 2026/2027. E levu na i duidui rai me baleta na i tuvatuva ni lavo ni yabaki vou. Ia, meu tukuna vakadodonu e sega ni gauna rawarawa vei Viti. Na dredre oqo e sega ni kilai ga i Viti. E vakila talega na veimatanitu e vuravura raraba.

E dodonu me da kila ni sega ni rawa ni veivuke vei keda kece na matanitu e na dua ga na gauna. Na matanitu oqo e vakabibitaka na kena vakayagataki vakayalomatua ka vaka vuku na i lavo ni matanitu me vakauqeti kina na loloma cakacaka vata, veivakatorocaketaki kei na kena taqomaki talega na i lavo ni matanitu.

Na bula vinaka ni vanua ko Viti e sega ni yaco ga e na i lavo ia ena cakacaka vata,

veirogorogoci kei na kena vakatuburi na bula e na veika sa tu rawa vei keda.

[Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to express my views regarding the 2026-2027 National budget. There are many differing perspectives on the new financial plan for the upcoming year. However, let me state clearly that these are no easy times for Fiji. These challenges are not unique to Fiji alone. They are also being felt by nations all across the world.

We must understand that the government cannot provide assistance to everyone all at once. This government prioritises the responsible and wise utilisation of public funds to encourage cooperation, development, and the safeguarding of national finances.

The prosperity of our nation, Fiji, is achieved not only through money, but through working together, listening to one another, and building a livelihood from the resources already available to us.]

Mr. Speaker, Sir, by focusing on efficiency, prioritising reform, invest in better systems and protecting criminal justice programmes, we are ensuring that the Ministry of Justice continues to fulfil its mandate despite tighter fiscal conditions. This is the hallmark of a mature and responsible Government one that recognises the need for discipline today in order to secure better outcomes tomorrow.

The message to the Public Service is clear. We must continue to innovate, improve, modernise and deliver. We must continue building a culture where performance is driven not by the size of our budgets, but by the quality of our leadership, the strength of our systems and our unwavering commitment to the people we serve.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to respond to some of the contributions made by of our Opposition Members. Allow me first to respond to honourable Pillay. Let me be very clear with you honourable Pillay and the Opposition Members. The last Bainimarama government left the sugar industry in a very damaged state. They presided over a decline, they failed to act decisively, and they allowed one of our most important industries to be pushed to the edge.

The Opposition now wants to speak on the sugar about the Province of Ra. Yet, it was their own actions that led to the dismantling of the FSC Penang mill. Listen to me very well, honourable Opposition Members. This decision remains a source of distress for the farmers in Ra until today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I call on the Ra farmers to begin a managed transition towards diversifying cropping while this Government and its partner institution will provide the necessary support. Some of our Ra farmers are taking decisive steps to diversifying their cropping systems by planting cowpea, beans and coffee. I thank the honourable Minister for Agriculture, honourable Sakiusa Tubuna and also honourable Kamikamica. These grassroot shifts deserve recognition and targeted support from this august House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for generations, many families in Ra have relied heavily on a narrow set of crops which was damaged and distracted by the FijiFirst government. Recently, however, hard-working farmers across the province have begun planting cowpea and coffee as complementary crops.

Cowpea offers a fast-maturing nutritious legume that improves household food security and provides an additional source of income at our local markets. Mr. Speaker, Sir, with stable slopes and microclimates in parts of Ra, coffee can provide a long-term revenue, stimulate small-scale processing enterprises, and create jobs in our rural community in Ra.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for your information, Ra coffee has a reputation both at home and around the world because of its distinct sweetness. It is one of the sweetest coffees around the world.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I conclude by joining the honourable Members in commending my *Turaga Mataqali* the Minister for Finance, the honourable Esrom Emmanuel, for delivering a balanced, prudent and responsible Budget during a period when economies around the world continue to face significant uncertainty.

Despite these global challenges, this Government has delivered a Budget that strikes the right balance between fiscal responsibility and continued investment in essential public services. It reflects our commitment to strengthening institutions, improving service delivery, and ensuring that development benefits all Fijians.

Before I take my seat, I want to correct honourable Ketan Lal. Unfortunately, he is not here again when I am speaking. Also, to the honourable Members of the Opposition. We were sacked from the FijiFirst party. Let me make this very clear. We were sacked by the FijiFirst party, and our letter was signed by honourable Faiyaz Koya. Honourable Koya is there to make this issue very clear. When we were sacked, we were independent, and we showed our support to the honourable Prime Minister, because we know he will take Fiji in the right direction.

With those few words, I commend this Budget to this august House.

MR. SPEAKER.- My apologies, I will go one step back. I have omitted to include honourable Ratu Rakuita Vakalalabure, who is supposed to take the floor before the honourable Deputy Speaker. Honourable Ratu Vakalalabure, you have the floor, Sir.

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament. I rise today in this august House to express my full and unwavering support for the 2026-2027 National Budget, a budget that reflects discipline, responsibility, and a clear vision for Fiji's future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset, I must thank and congratulate the honourable Minister for Finance for delivering his first budget. I also acknowledge the hardworking staff at the Ministry of Finance for their tireless work in putting together a budget that is fit for Fiji. As the Assistant Minister for Defence and Veteran Affairs, I speak not only from the perspective of national security and veteran welfare, but also as a Member of a Government that has worked tirelessly to restore stability, rebuild confidence, and steer our nation through one of the most challenging global environments in recent history.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is not merely a financial document. It is a statement of intent. It is a declaration that Fiji will not be defined by global crisis, nor will we be paralysed by the economic shocks that have affected nations across the world. Instead, we will respond with resilience, discipline and unity. We will invest in our people, strengthen our institutions and build a future that is secure, sustainable and prosperous.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before addressing the specifics of the Budget, it is important to recognise the global context in which this Budget has been crafted. The world is facing an unprecedented convergence of crisis. The geopolitical tensions have disrupted global trade routes and increased the cost of essential imports. Supply chain disruptions have affected manufacturing, construction and logistics.

These crisis, Mr. Speaker, Sir, have not spared Fiji. Our economy, heavily reliant on imports, tourism and global connectivity, has felt the full weight of these shocks. The rise in fuel prices has increased the cost of transportation, electricity and basic goods. The volatility in global markets has affected investment flows. The intensifying impacts of climate change have demanded greater spending on disaster response, infrastructure resilience and community protection. Yet, despite these challenges, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government has remained steadfast. We have not shied away from difficult decisions. We have not resorted to populism or short-term political gains. Instead, we have chosen a path of responsibility, a path that prioritises long-term stability over short-term applause.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2026-2027 Budget is a disciplined Budget. It maintains total Government expenditure at \$4.8 billion, the same level as the previous year. This is a clear signal that the Government is committed to fiscal restraint, even as we continue to invest in critical sectors. Operational spending across the military has been reduced by 10 percent, demonstrating that the Government is willing to lead by example.

We are tightening our belts, reducing unnecessary travel and administrative costs, and ensuring that every dollar spent delivers value to the people of Fiji. This is not austerity, this is responsibility and leadership. Honourable Speaker, allow me to speak directly to the allocations for the Ministry of Defence and Veterans Affairs. National security is one of the fundamental responsibilities of Government.

Without peace, stability and security, the country's economic growth, investment and social development cannot flourish. Every school that is built, every business that opens, every tourist who visits our shores and every family living in Fiji depends on a safe, secure and stable nation to invest and live peacefully. This budget recognizes that reality by continuing to invest in the very institutions that protect Fiji's sovereignty and its people.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Defence and Veterans Affairs has been allocated a budget of \$20.1 million in the 2026 and 2027 budget. The Ministry continues to play a critical role in developing defence policy, strengthening national resilience, coordinating civil-military cooperation, and ensuring that Fiji's defence capabilities remain aligned with our national development priorities and international recognition.

In addition, the budget underscores the Government's continued dedication to the effective implementation of the recommendations within the national security strategy, ensuring a coordinated and resilient approach to addressing Fiji's security challenges. Furthermore, the Government's allocation of funding for the Women, Peace and Security Initiative under this budget is highly commendable.

By supporting both, the RFMF and the Fiji Police Force, Government acknowledges the invaluable contributions of women in the security services and demonstrates its commitment to addressing the challenges they encounter while promoting greater inclusion, participation and leadership opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an area that deserves recognition is the Government's continued commitment and support to our veterans through the Aftercare Fund. Continued support to the Aftercare Fund demonstrates the Government's acknowledgement and appreciation to veterans who have dedicated many years to protecting Fiji and promoting peace in UN Mission areas under the United Nations flag. They deserve continued support, recognition and opportunities to contribute to nation-building.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is increasingly confronted by security challenges that extend beyond our borders. The rise of illicit drug trafficking, organised crime, illegal fishing, cyber threats and human trafficking requires a coordinated national response. These threats affect not only our national security, but also our economy, our communities and the wellbeing of our young people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the RFMF continues to demonstrate exceptional commitment both within Fiji, the region and internationally. The professionalism, discipline and dedication of our servicemen and women have earned Fiji global respect through peacekeeping missions, while also providing critical assistance during natural disasters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the RFMF has been allocated \$152.6 million in the 2026-2027 budget. Despite the reduction of the budget from the previous years, this does not deter the important role of the RFMF in safeguarding Fiji's sovereignty, protecting our national interests and contributing to regional and international peace and security. This budget will continue to allow for RFMF to enhance its capability, preparedness and readiness to fight against the grey zone threat that threatens to compromise our national security.

Furthermore, Sir, the budget places significant emphasis on strengthening Fiji's capacity to combat transnational crime through enhanced support for the Joint Counter-Narcotics Taskforce, improved maritime surveillance, stronger border protection and greater inter-agency coordination. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fight against illicit drugs remains one of Fiji's most pressing national priorities. Drug trafficking destroys families and undermines the future of our youth. The support role of the RFMF within the Joint Counter-Narcotics Taskforce demonstrates Government's whole-of-a-nation approach in addressing this ongoing challenge.

By strengthening intelligence sharing, border monitoring, and coordinated operations between security agencies, Government is taking proactive steps to disrupt criminal networks, reduce harm, supply and demand within our communities. This investment is not simply about reinforcement. It is about protecting our community and future generations of Fijians. It is about ensuring that Fiji does not become a narco-state of the Pacific.

The RFMF and the Ministry in collaboration with the Fiji Police Force, the Ministry of Policing and Communications, the Ministry of Immigration, Fiji Revenue and Customs Service, the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry and other national security agencies, will continue to work together to strengthen surveillance and monitoring capabilities across Fiji's vast maritime boundaries as per the 2026 and 2027 Budget. This will ensure that Fiji remains vigilant against emerging threats while protecting our territorial integrity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our military personnel have consistently demonstrated their value and commitment beyond traditional defence responsibilities. Whenever Fiji experiences cyclones, floods, landslides, or other natural disasters, the RFMF is one of the first responders to be deployed to the affected areas. Soldiers are out in the affected community providing support in the delivery of emergency relief supplies, restoring access to communities, assisting at evacuation centres, and rebuilding damaged infrastructure to provide assurance to affected families. Their contribution, Sir, during national emergencies illustrates that investment in defence is also an investment in disaster preparedness and humanitarian assistance. It is an investment for every Fijian who encounters this unfortunate event.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget also recognises the importance of maintaining safe and secure maritime borders, advancing Fiji's blue autonomy to improve maritime navigation safety and precise hydrographic charting of its exclusive economic zone, and the ability to respond to emergencies in our maritime territory.

As a nation surrounded by one of the largest exclusive economic zones in the Pacific, Fiji must continue to strengthen and enhance its maritime surveillance and monitoring capabilities, effectively respond to Search and Rescue (SAR) emergencies not only within our waters, but within our SAR regions, protect our fishery resources, safeguard our marine environment and prevent illegal activities that threaten our economy and national security. Furthermore, Sir, this Budget is not only intended to strengthen and secure our maritime domain, but also to support the charting of Fiji's \$1.3 million square kilometres of exclusive economic zone, ensuring safe navigation at sea while contributing to the sustainable growth of Fiji's blue economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2026-2027 Budget also complements wider investments across Government to strengthen national resilience, significant allocations towards policing, immigration, infrastructure, healthcare, education and rural development collectively create stronger communities and reduce the underlying vulnerabilities that can threaten national security. Defence cannot operate in isolation. We succeed when supported by strong institutions and resilient communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the benefits of the Budget extend well beyond the Defence sector. Ordinary Fijians, stronger national security means safer communities, improved protection against organised crimes and greater confidence for business to invest and create employment opportunities. Stronger maritime surveillance protects our natural resources for future generations. Enhanced disaster response capabilities ensure fast assistance during emergencies. Continued peacekeeping participation also enhances Fiji's international footprint while providing valuable professional development opportunities for our military personnel. Furthermore, securing our borders contributes to safer tourism, stronger trade, increased investor confidence and greater economic stability. These outcomes directly improve the quality of life for every Fijian household.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to acknowledge the dedication of every member of the RFMF. Their commitment, professionalism and unwavering service continue to make our nation proud, whether serving overseas under the UN, protecting our borders, responding to disaster or assisting communities in times of need, they embody the values of courage, discipline and service. This Budget reflects a balanced and strategic approach to national development. In terms of education, the Government understands that education is the foundation of national progress. We are strengthening teacher deployment and improving school infrastructure and ensuring that students receive the support they need to succeed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the \$2 billion renewable energy package is one of the most transformative investments in Fiji's history. It includes two new hydropower schemes, totalling 50 megawatts – 165 megawatts of solar generation and major grid upgrades. The \$2 billion renewable energy programme is a direct response to global fuel volatility. By investing in hydropower, solar generation, and grid upgrades, Fiji is reducing its dependence on imported fuel. This is not just an energy investment; it is an economic shield. It is a long-term solution to a long-term vulnerability. Across all Ministries, the Budget reflects discipline, prioritisation, and a commitment to improving service delivery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget builds on the achievements of the Coalition Government over the past four years, restoring fiscal discipline, strengthening border security, modernising urban planning systems, enhancing disaster response capabilities, expanding renewable energy investments, strengthening anti-narcotics operations, and enhancing transparency and accountability. These achievements demonstrate a government that is focused, disciplined, and committed to long-term prosperity.

It is important for this House and for the people of Fiji to understand the global environment in which the 2026-2027 Budget was developed. This is not a Budget crafted in ordinary times. It is a Budget shaped during one of the most significant geopolitical disruptions of the decade – the closure

of the Strait of Hormuz. A crisis that sent shockwaves through global markets and directly affected the cost of living for every nation, including our own.

The Strait of Hormuz, as the honourable Members are aware, is one of the world's most critical maritime chokepoints. Nearly 20 percent of global oil shipments pass through this narrow waterway. Its closure, even temporarily, triggered immediate and severe consequences. The global fuel price surged, shipping insurance costs spiked, supply chains slowed and halted, import-dependent economies faced sudden inflationary pressure, and energy security became a global concern overnight.

For Fiji, a nation thousands of miles away, yet deeply connected to global trade, the impacts were felt swiftly. Fuel prices rose sharply, affecting transportation, electricity generation, and the cost of essential goods. The price of imported food increased, construction materials became more expensive, tourism operators faced higher operating costs, families felt the pressure at the supermarket, at the fuel pump, and in their daily expenses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is precisely in this environment of global uncertainty, rising costs, and economic fragility, the Coalition Government crafted the 2026-2027 National Budget. That is why this Budget is not only responsible, but also necessary. It is not only disciplined, but also timely. It is not only prudent, but also the best-suited Budget for Fiji now more than ever. This Budget recognises that Fiji cannot control global crisis, but we can control how we respond to them.

We cannot control what happens at the Strait of Hormuz, but we can strengthen our resilience. We cannot dictate global fuel prices, but we can invest in renewable energy. We cannot eliminate supply chain disruptions, but we can improve domestic capacity and reduce wasteful spending. We cannot prevent geopolitical tensions, but we can ensure that our defence forces, our border agencies, and our national security institutions are well resourced and prepared. This Budget is a demonstration of leadership in crisis. It is a demonstration of foresight and responsibility.

With those few words, I fully support the 2026-2027 National Budget.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, at this juncture, we will suspend our proceedings for lunch. The Parliament will resume in an hour's time.

The Parliament adjourned at 1.05 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.49 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before I invite the Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Deputy Speaker to begin this afternoon's proceedings with her contribution to the debate on the 2026 Appropriations Bill, I would like you to join me in welcoming to our Parliament the members of the Israeli Allies Foundation, an informal Parliamentary organisation that is always working with over 50 Parliaments around the world in establishing closer cooperation between legislators and in furtherance of peace in Israel and the Middle East. They are:

- Mr. Josh Reinstein, President of the Israeli Allies Foundation and Director of the Knesset Christian Alliance Caucus;
- Dr. David Parsons, Senior Vice President and International Spokesperson for International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem; and
- Honourable Andrew Wallace, Chairperson of the Australia-Israel Allies Caucus, and Mrs. Wallace.

Finally, I find a familiar face, Mrs. Fine Ditoka.

(Acclamation)

We are delighted to welcome you to our shores, and we congratulate you on successfully concluding an agreement with our Fiji legislators in the process of strengthening the bond of friendship that exists between our two countries. Again, congratulations and our warmest welcome to our Fiji Parliament.

Honourable Members, I will now call upon the Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs and Deputy Speaker, for her contribution.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, fellow Members of Parliament and fellow Fijians; *ni sa bula saka*.

I rise in support of the 2026-2027 Budget, and I do so with a solid focus on the vital role that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade plays in safeguarding Fiji's sovereignty, advancing our economic interests, and projecting our voice on the global stage. To ground our operational strategy for the year ahead, I have to turn to the timeless wisdom of the Gospel according to Luke 4: 28, which reads: "For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it?"

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this profound scripture text defines the exact approach the coalition Government has taken. We have sat down. We have evaluated our global targets. We have meticulously counted the cost, and this budget represents an intentional, highly detailed operational blueprint to expanding Fiji's international footprint while maintaining absolute financial discipline, transparency, and, of course, value for money.

I thank the honourable Minister for Finance, Permanent Secretary Shiri Goundar, and their team for their leadership in articulating a budget that reflects the aspirations of our foreign policy. I also acknowledge the Minister for Foreign Affairs and External Trade for his leadership and I want to express my appreciation to the Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs and External Trade, Dr. Raijeli Taga, who is probably watching from New Zealand right now, and our teams at the headquarters in Suva, in Nadi, and around the world, for their continued commitment and guidance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, international diplomacy cannot simply be measured by high-level delegations, abstract strategies, or handshakes at international summits. The true measure of our global success is found in the daily operational mechanics of our foreign service in our overseas missions, our trade offices, and our bilateral negotiations.

Our overseas missions have continued to facilitate trade and investment opportunities, promote tourism, support labour mobility initiatives, and provide essential consular services to Fijians living, working, and travelling abroad. One of the defining features of this Government's foreign policy has been the restoration of trust. International partnerships are built on credibility, consistency, and mutual respect.

The Coalition Government has demonstrated that Fiji is a reliable partner that honours its commitments, engages constructively with all countries, and pursues diplomacy based on dialogue rather than division, and this is why the 2026-2027 budget is designed to align spending directly with performance metrics. Under this framework, every single dollar is tied to measurable operational outcomes. We are evaluating our offices by how effectively they secure foreign development assistance, open fresh trade corridors for Fijian exports, accelerate the processing times for investor visas, and provide streamlined consular services to our vast diaspora.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, counting the cost means equipping our frontline global team with the exact financial resources required to deliver. I am immensely proud to highlight this, that in this National Budget, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade, as we heard yesterday from the honourable Minister, has been allocated a total of \$56.6 million. This sends a clear message to our global allies, that Fiji is expanding its international presence. This funding is explicitly structured to sustain our global footprint, through the existing 14 strategically placed Diplomatic Missions, one Suva-based regional mission, and four dedicated trade commissions, globally.

Let me break down this \$56.6 million allocation so that this august House can understand where the rubber meets the road.

- (1) A critical priority within this total is the \$6.3 million set aside exclusively to operationalise our newly established diplomatic mission in Jerusalem and to successfully reopen our foreign mission in Brussels. These two Missions are vital for expanding our strategic reach, reinforcing key economic connections with foundational global markets, and strengthening Fiji's voice in regional and international affairs.
- (2) Under SEG 1 - Established Staff, our personnel costs across the globe are now managed through a unified personnel emoluments allocation. This simplifies bankroll tracking across our local policy offices in Suva, and our posted diplomatic staff stationed worldwide, ensuring we remain agile when deploying diplomatic talent.
- (3) Our operational machinery relies heavily on SEG 4 - Maintenance and Operations. This funding goes directly towards the upkeep of Fiji's overseas Chanceries, Diplomatic Residences, and to securing global communications networks and this ensures we preserve State-owned assets and prevent the long-term deterioration of our embassies abroad.
- (4) SEG 5 - Purchase of Goods and Services, our procurement processes have been strictly optimised. This funding covers vital operational inputs, diplomatic logistics, and specialised global services across our overseas missions, all driven by strict cost containment measures and centralised oversight to completely prevent wasteful spending.

The Ministry also works in synergy through our diplomatic network to drive the crucial cross-

border policy monitoring, global partner alignment, and international treaty adherence necessary to safeguard our borders and dismantle transnational crime networks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this integrated approach has strengthened confidence amongst development partners and created new opportunities for cooperation in infrastructure, in education, health, agriculture, renewable energy, maritime security and human resource development.

Our foreign service is not just a symbol; it is a driver of opportunities. They are economic outposts working every day to secure things including, technical partnerships to strengthen our local industries, new markets for Fijian products, security arrangements and our role in international peace and security and scholarships for our young people.

Our diplomats have robustly represented Fiji in regional and multilateral forums, ensuring that the priorities of small island developing states remain visible on the global agenda. Whether advocating for climate justice, sustainable ocean management, development finance or peace and security, Fiji has remained a credible and influential voice. We must recognise that diplomacy is an investment, not merely an expense. Through proactive diplomacy we are transforming international goodwill into tangible domestic benefits. Every successful negotiation that features grant financing reduces pressure on the national budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, every investment promotion initiative creates employment opportunities for Fijians. Every export agreement opens new markets for our producers and those in the MSME sector. Every labour mobility arrangement provides employment opportunities and income for Fijian families and valuable skills for our workforce, and every international partnership strengthens our national resilience. The returns generated by effective diplomacy extend far beyond the Ministry's annual allocation.

Mr Speaker, Sir, Fiji remains steadfast in its commitment to regional leadership and cooperation. As a trusted voice in the Blue Pacific, we will continue working closely with our Pacific neighbours to advance our shared priorities, including climate action, ocean governance, regional security, economic resilience and sustainable development. And through this Budget, Sir, we reaffirm Fiji's commitment to strengthening regional institutions, promoting Pacific solidarity and ensuring that the collective voice of our region continues to shape the global agenda for the benefit of all Pacific peoples.

On the regional front, Sir, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIFS) remains as Fiji's priority area of engagement where important regional matters such as the reform of the PIFS architecture, regional security, oceans and climate change priorities and trade negotiations continue to be pivotal areas for discussions by Pacific Island Forum Leaders for the next financial year.

As at sub-regional level, Sir, Fiji's leadership of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) is an important area of focus for the next financial year. This includes working with the newly appointed Secretary-General on addressing outstanding matters and resetting the strategic compass for the MSG operational focus for the next three years.

Strengthening bilateral cooperation will be an ongoing area of focus and for the new financial year the focus will be on enhancing cooperation and technical assistance around HIV and AIDS and drugs to support the agencies responsible for addressing these issues.

On the multilateral front, the team is gearing up on preparations for the 81st session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in September, of course pre-COP in Fiji and Tuvalu in October, the 2026 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Antigua and Barbuda in November,

continued leadership of Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) as Chair in New York and in 2027, the first Conference of the Parties on the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) and the biannual EU-Fiji Political Dialogue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget also supports the Ministry's commitment to strengthening engagement with the Fijian diaspora. Our citizens living, working and studying abroad remain an important part of Fiji's national development, and through the development and the implementation of Fiji's diaspora policy we will foster stronger connections with our overseas communities, improve consular and outreach services, encourage knowledge and skills exchange and create greater opportunities for diaspora investment and partnerships.

By harnessing the expertise, networks and contributions of Fijians abroad, we can further advance our economic, social and national development objectives. The Ministry will be working on the implementation plan for the diaspora policy in the upcoming fiscal year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, executing a Foreign Affairs Budget requires exceptional speed to navigate highly volatile global dynamics, sudden geopolitical shifts and fast-moving international negotiations.

Under the Financial Management Act 2004, this reform grants our permanent secretary the localised authority to manage variations within operational categories like daily diplomatic communication, urgent mission maintenance and sudden travel logistics, and this cuts the red tape that previously stalled time-sensitive international engagements. However, this flexibility is balanced with absolute accountability.

The Ministry of Finance's new digitised budget platform integrates our global missions directly with headquarters in Suva. This ensures real-time monitoring and complete auditability of our operating costs, keeping us fully synchronised with our fiscal targets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a major component of our Ministry's daily mandate is managing and leveraging our relationships with external development partners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to maximise our reach, this Budget properly maps out external funding to ensure there is no duplication of State resources. We tightly monitor direct development payments financed by foreign partners to ensure critical national projects move ahead without domestic administrative delays. This Budget also empowers Fiji to maintain its rightful place as the diplomatic hub of the Pacific.

Furthermore, the aid-in-kind framework captures non-cash contributions of technical expertise, equipment and international training from our global allies. By mapping these contributions transparently alongside our local revenue, we ensure that our line ministries stretch the Fijian taxpayer dollar further, aligning international goodwill directly with our national priorities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2026-2027 Budget is about making responsible choices today so that Fiji is stronger tomorrow. It demonstrates that the Coalition Government is prepared to manage public finances prudently while continuing to invest in our people, our institutions, and our future. It has capped unnecessary operational expenditures while systematically protecting the vulnerable and funding key growth sectors. For the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade, this budget provides the resources to continue protecting Fiji's interests abroad, strengthening international partnerships, and delivering practical benefits for every Fijian.

This Budget also ensures that Fiji remains economically resilient at home and diplomatically

strong abroad. The baseline machinery of our global presence has been fully funded. We have sat down, we have counted the cost, and we have positioned Fiji to speak with a strong, unified, and respected voice on the world stage. We are expanding our trade frontiers, defending our regional borders, and building a sustainable future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji deeply values the continued support of all our development partners whose contributions have been instrumental in advancing national development priorities. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade will continue to work closely with the line agencies and the development partners to address social and developmental challenges.

The transformation of our economy, Sir, is central to securing sustainable and inclusive growth in the decades ahead. Public-private partnerships, economic diversification, and value addition is essential in our resource-based sectors, including agriculture, fisheries, forestry, and indeed in tourism. I acknowledge the dedication of our diplomats, locally engaged staff, and officers both at headquarters in Nadi and across our overseas missions. Their professionalism continues to enhance Fiji's reputation globally.

The mandate now shifts entirely from policy planning to active execution now, Sir. This budget demands a proactive culture from our diplomats, our trade officials, and policy teams to translate every dollar into a tangible economic return, a fresh investment, or a stronger partnership for the people of Fiji.

With that said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with clear targets, robust financial discipline, and of course a profound commitment to Fiji's national progress, I have nothing else to add, but to say that I fully support the Budget, and I commend this motion to the House. Thank you, Sir. God bless Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- I am informed that also joining us in the gallery is the Deputy High Commissioner for New Zealand, Mr. Sam Cox. You are most welcome to the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji, His Excellency.

I next invite the honourable Minister for Education to deliver his response to the motion.

HON. A.M RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet colleagues, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and Members of Parliament, our distinguished guests in the gallery, and every Fijian joining us through live stream across the country and abroad. *Bula vinaka* and a very good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the 2026-2027 National Budget. Firstly, I would like to congratulate and acknowledge the honourable Minister of Finance for presenting his first budget that reflects the Government's priorities and the difficult decisions required to balance the needs of our people and the country's fiscal responsibilities. *Vinaka vakalevu, kemudrau.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is always important to reflect on the journey of what education can do. I draw on the inspirational words of the global leader, the late South African President Nelson Mandela, in one of his most famous quotes when he said, and I quote:

“Education is the greatest engine of personal development. It is through education that a daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, a son of a mine worker can become the head of a mine, that a child of a farm worker can become the President of a nation.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I make this final budget response, as Minister for Education during this fourth year of Parliament, I reflect on my personal journey in this office for the last three and a half

years, which has brought me face to face with the challenges of our people, especially the struggles of those who are determined that their children will get the best education opportunities they can get.

Many have uprooted entire families and moved to the urban centres, living in less than what they used to have in their islands or rural homes, because they hinge their hopes on their child getting a good education and giving back to their families and communities so that their living standards can be better for the future. There is not always a success story, because sometimes these commitments fail to yield the desired result as the child gets overwhelmed by various challenges that confront the education sector.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is where the arms of government and the supporting roles of the NGOs, CSOs, religious organisations, *vanua* and others become crucial as life partners in the quest for the holistic support of a child in their journey to access education and make something for their lives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it has become a pleasure over the years to extend gratitude and to continue to encourage all stakeholders of our over 900-plus schools, of which I have personally visited over 700 of those to stay focused on the important task of uplifting the lives of our children and our communities through education.

Education remains one of Government's most important investments because it shapes the future of our children and the future of our nation. The Government's role must be robust not only to provide support through the provision of teachers, but also logistical support through financial commitments and demonstrated through various policies of government that was outlined by the honorable Minister for Finance during his Budget Address on 26th June, 2026 in this august House.

The 2025-2026 Budget ensured that schools continue to operate. Teachers were supported and students had access to assistance they needed to remain in education. The 2026 Budget strengthened that support by providing additional funding for the programmes and services that our schools, teachers and students rely on everyday.

The education sector has been allocated \$883.3 million for the 2026-2027 financial year, an increase from \$847.4 million in 2025-2026. Of this allocation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$708 million has been provided to the Ministry of Education, including \$74.5 million for higher education institutions. A further \$160 million has been allocated to the tertiary scholarship and loan services to ensure that students continue to have access to tertiary education and skills training.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of Government's policies that continues its commitment for all children to attend school is through the provision of \$54 million in bus fare assistance. It will assist 114,728 students in the nine education districts for the Student Transport Assistance Programme. This funding will assist 114,000 students, eligible students comprising of 70,550 students using blue cards and 44,178 students currently receiving rural service licence voucher.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, approximately 46,995 yellow card users are on record as benefiting from the Government's 50 percent bus fare subsidy amounting to an average of \$535,000 monthly. However, this budget calls for stringent measures to fiscal expenditures by Government, and this particular commitment has been looked into carefully as it subsidizes bus fares being paid by students in general who did not apply for assistance.

There have been more notable excessive claims by bus companies for yellow card subsidies, and I have directed that the claims be verified against the number of students supposedly in schools, as there seems to be more students being claimed than the records show at the Ministry of Education

of students that remain in the education system.

The Ministry is, therefore, reviewing the students' transport assistance policy to strengthen the administration of the programme, improve accountability and ensure that assistance continues to reach the students who need it most. The review will also consider the circumstances of students who travel long distances to school, particularly those living in remote and maritime communities served by Fiji's 684 rural service licence providers. Government remains committed to ensuring that student transport assistance continues to meet its purpose by supporting school attendance and reducing the financial burden on families with the provision of two additional vouchers to RSL providers.

Mr. Speaker, learning begins long before a child enters Year 1. The early years are critical in developing the literacy, numeracy and social skills that children carry throughout their education. In 2025, Fiji historically advanced the Early Childhood Education (ECE) by extending the hours of study for students into a normal full day of study, beginning at 8.00 a.m. and finishing at 3.00 p.m. daily. I know ECE students and teachers have settled in well to these new extended hours routine.

The 2026-2027 Budget maintains the support to Early Childhood Education tuition by providing \$34.176 million, an increase of \$1.84 million for Early Childhood Education tuition subsidy. This funding will assist with the provision of recruitment of 41-degree graduate ECE teachers, and this will increase the total number of ECE teachers to 1,484 in the Ministry of Education. The Ministry will continue to work closely with Early Childhood Education partners such as the UNICEF to review the Noda Mataniciva Curriculum and the Yavutu Programme to ensure that the standard of early learning continues to improve across Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, the primary and secondary education remains the foundation of Fiji's education system. It is in our classroom that children acquire the knowledge, skills and values that prepare them for higher education, technical training and employment. The 2026-2027 Budget continues the delivery of education across the country by providing schools with the resources needed to meet their operational requirements and maintain quality learning and teaching.

Governments remain committed to ensuring that every child has access to education, regardless of where they live or their family's financial circumstances. This commitment continues through the provision of Free Education Grant, which provides direct financial assistance to schools and reduces the financial burden on parents and guardians. For the 2026 financial year, government primary schools have been allocated \$276,889 under the Free Education Grant, while the non-government primary schools will receive \$30 million in addition to the \$391,304 which has been allocated under the per capita boarding grant for eligible primary schools.

For secondary schools, government secondary schools have been allocated \$3.49 million under the Free Education Grant, while non-government secondary schools will receive \$27 million. A further \$349,239 has been provided under the per capita boarding grant to support eligible boarding schools. This grant assists schools in meeting their day-to-day operational costs, purchasing teaching and learning materials, and maintaining an environment that supports effective learning. It also eases the financial pressure on families by allowing schools to meet essential operational requirements without placing additional cost on parents.

The Ministry of Education is grateful for the continuation of the Free Education Grant, Mr. Speaker, Sir, given to schools amounting to \$64.7 million, compared to \$68.9 million in 2025-2026. These assistances have been continuing for more than 10 years to-date, and the Ministry continues to challenge schools on the proper utilisation and improvement of the school system and the resourcing of schools, it is given in six different categories, covering administration, computing, et

cetera. They are now also given the flexibility to use the Free Education Grant, the Ministry of Education has also approved a total of nine schools on the use of these grants for school repairs, teacher quarters upgrade, and any other repairs in the school. The Ministry of Education will continue to monitor the use of Free Education Grant to ensure value for money.

The Budget also provides \$4.05 million for rations in government secondary boarding schools. This allows the Ministry to advocate the importance of Backyard School Gardening and Farming of all schools around Fiji and ensuring that students attending schools continue to receive appropriate nutritional diet.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government continues to allocate \$630,000 for the Menstrual Hygiene Management Programme. This programme supports the health and wellbeing of female students and helps remove barriers that may affect regular school attendance and participation. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government support for primary and secondary school education extends beyond funding alone. It is about ensuring that schools have the resources that they need to provide a safe, supportive, and effective learning environment for every child.

No education system can succeed without its teachers. Every lesson delivered, every student guided, and every school supported begins with the dedication and professionalism of our teaching workforce. Government recognises that improving educational outcome depends on ensuring that our teachers have the support they need to carry out their responsibilities.

The 2026-2027 Budget strengthens the continued delivery of teaching services across the country by maintaining funding for established and unestablished positions, relieving teachers and the allowances necessary to support service delivery throughout Fiji. The Budget provides \$434.1 million for established staff and \$4.78 million for unestablished staff, compared to \$423.5 million and \$4.55 million respectively in 2025-2026. This increased allocation ensures that school continues to be properly staffed and the Ministry is able to respond to address teacher needs in school after careful verification and school staff audits are undertaken on a regular basis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government also recognises the challenges faced by teachers serving in rural, remote and maritime communities. These officers often work in difficult circumstances and make considerable personal sacrifices to ensure that children continue to receive an education. The continued provision of location allowance recognises these challenges and supports the deployment and retention of teachers in areas where they are needed most.

The Budget also provides for relieving teachers to ensure that learning is not disrupted when substantive teachers are on approved leave or undertaking professional development or are temporarily unable to perform their duties. Maintaining continuity in the classroom remains a priority of the Ministry.

Supporting teachers is not limited to salaries and allowance. It also means providing schools with the resources they require, maintaining a safe working environment and ensuring that teachers can focus on what they do best, which is teaching our children. There have been issues on teachers who have not received salaries, despite being in school. This includes acting allowances due to delayed HR and finance processing in the Ministry of Education. This is an area which we have struggled with due to questionable appointments and possible abuse of the system and will continue to be an issue if not addressed and the right people put in to curb the leakages and the mismanagement that happens from the headquarters end.

I want to put on record that our Ministry of Education team has now been tasked to work with the Ministry of Civil Service and the Ministry of Finance to formalise these anomalies and

discrepancies that have hounded our education sector over the recent years. The Government will continue working with school leaders, teachers and their respective organisations to strengthen the teaching profession and improve educational outcomes for all students.

The Ministry of Education is also, through its Divisional Education Offices, working through its pool of teachers available in schools for their proper utilisation. At times there have been teacher shortages raised, yet when an audit of teachers available is carried out through ER5 and ER8, the schools have sufficient teachers but are not utilising them properly. These are issues the Ministry of Education is directing to be addressed with heads of schools. A strong education system depends on a strong teaching workforce, and this budget continues to recognise the important contributions teachers make to the future of our nation.

On TVET, the Government remains committed to ensuring that TVET is recognised as a pathway of opportunity and achievement. With the allocation of \$5.3 million in the 2026-2027 Budget, it will provide students with practical skills, create employment opportunities, and support national economic development by producing graduates who are ready to enter the workforce. Every student deserves to learn in an environment that is safe, functional and conducive to learning. Every teacher deserves a workplace that supports effective teaching. The Government continues to invest in school infrastructure, because buildings, utilities and essential services are fundamental to the delivery of quality education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to inform this august House that the Emergency Ratification Exercise, which was undertaken at Adi Cakobau School last week, is now fully restored. I also wish to acknowledge and thank the hard work of the Director of the National Disaster Management Office, Electrical Department of the Ministry of Public Works, and the Ministry of Education officials and school administration for getting things done on time.

The Government has allocated a total of \$7.3 million for infrastructure development, which will continue to support the upgrade and enhancement of teachers' quarters in government schools, building grants for teachers' quarters in non-government schools, purchase of boats and outboard motor engines for schools in maritime areas, primary and secondary school water tanks and solar panel systems for rural and maritime schools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also would like to acknowledge the continued partnership with DFAT for the construction of the school facilities and WASH facilities that have been agreed upon with the Ministry of Education. We will continue to strictly monitor the utilisation of these grants to allow for maximum benefit for the Ministry.

The Higher Education Commission Fiji has been approved a total of \$2.5 million for 2026-2027 financial year compared to \$2.1 million in 2025-2026. We will continue to work with them to ensure the effective monitoring and diligent conduct of their roles and responsibilities.

On the Fiji Teachers Registration Authority (FTRA), an allocation of \$900,000 for 2026-2027 remains unchanged from 2025-2026 financial year. We will continue to work with them for the effective implementation of the budget and review of their operations, especially on the registration of teacher graduates, thinking that registration at FTRA automatically guarantees them an employment position at the Ministry of Education.

For Tertiary Scholarships and Loan Scheme (TSLS), they have been allocated \$160 million for scholarship and study loans compared to \$153 million in the last budget. This allocation will allow TSLS to continue the operations in terms of scholarship awarding with prudence in finance and more accountability. We understand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that TSLS has been encouraged

to review the existing scholarship policy so that there is minimum disruption to students. They are also encouraged to work with tertiary institutions to ensure that students get the maximum benefit from their various schemes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Substance Abuse Advisory Council has been allocated an amount of \$681,931. This allocation will allow the continuous operations of the organisation in the training of teachers as child protection officers in primary and secondary schools, leadership training for secondary students, faith-based training, school awareness, community awareness, and village meetings. We thank the DFAT technical and financial support for the yet-to-be-opened new counselling hubs at Savusavu and Vunisea. These counselling hubs provide a space where students can come and share their challenges with professional counsellors from their respective districts.

The National Research Council has been allocated a sum of \$500,000. The Ministry is currently working on getting the Council in operation to allow them to effectively carry out their duties as mandated in the Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note there is a zero-budget allocation for the Education Commission. I thank the Education Commissioners for their services to Fiji, the education sector and I look forward to receiving the report of the work they have done in this one year so that it may be tabled before the Cabinet and the information of this august House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in closing, I want to make an acknowledgement statement as I approach the end of my tenure as Fiji's Minister for Education. It has been the greatest honour and a privilege to serve our nation and our people through this Ministry. Following the Coalition Government's agreement to form Government, the Ministry was allocated to SODELPA. As the party leader of SODELPA, I wish to thank the teachers of this country, the two teacher unions and all hardworking members of the school administration for the support and hard work given towards our education sector. Your tireless efforts may not always be recognised and rewarded appropriately, yet you have been the soul of this journey, and it is my prayer that you will all be blessed abundantly in this noble profession.

To the students, parents and guardians, and to all who support and provide services towards the education sector in one way or another, we have achieved much together. Your efforts will always be appreciated and know that you will all remain in my prayers. There could not have been a better Ministry I was called to lead than this most crucial and humbling of all ministries.

To the staff and support team of the Ministry of Education, each harsh delivered, each rebuke or gratitude offered, have always been done to bring out the best in your abilities, because we all serve a higher calling and for that, I thank you individually for your effort and endurance. I know that they say, each person that was allowed to pass through our life was intended and from each other we learn, grow and become better people. *Vinaka saka vakalevu na veiqaravi*. I will always look back to this period of growth and service with gratitude.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I end by saying that a country that neglects its education sector limits its own future. A country that invests in education strengthens its people, its institutions and its economy. That is the choice reflected in this Budget.

The allocation before this august House support children taking their first steps into the classroom, students preparing for higher education and technical training, teachers serving in schools across the country and communities working to provide better learning environment for the next generation.

Mr. Speaker, no government can promise every citizen the same starting point in life. What government can do is ensure that every child has a fair opportunity to succeed. That is the purpose of education and that is the purpose of this Budget. This National Budget is a statement of confidence in Fiji's people. It recognises that our country's greatest strength lies in an educated, skilled and populated and capable population and it provides the resources to continue building the future.

For those reasons, Mr. Speaker, I fully support the 2026-2027 National Budget and commend it to this honourable House.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, I rise today to speak on the 2026-2027 Budget Address. I want to start by speaking directly to the people of Fiji, especially to our young people who are watching today. There is a deep unsettling groan across our nation right now- it is a groan of frustration, a groan of exhaustion and a groan of pure disbelief at the theatre that we are forced to witness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the position Fiji is in today was very predictable, when the Coalition was formed in late 2022, when the plan and focus was set early 2023. By all indications set, we could see that the focus was set on dismantling FijiFirst what had set in the eight years of its administration. The focus clearly set a downward trajectory of the development that had been carried out, especially the economic rehabilitation after COVID-19 and the cyclones that had affected Fiji.

(Honourable Member interjected)

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Please, give me an opportunity.

Instead of focussing on discussion and plans to continue development programmes, their direction was to first hack down the main actors of the FijiFirst Government and to dismantle all initiatives that were on the ground. When the first budget was announced, it was very apparent that Fiji was already on the motion of diving down a slippery path. Sir, 2024 was basically a mirror of what started in 2023, and 2025 was very much similar, and the token corrections taken only slowed down the downward trend, and economists had predicted hitting the bottom at the end of 2025.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are told that this budget is about a forward-looking Fiji, yet at the very same time we have teams running around the country conducting constitutional review with leadership, publicly proclaiming that the single most explosive, critical issue under deliberation is land. What an absolute performance. They are engineering panic to justify their own existence. Let us speak the truth. They hope our youth are too uneducated to know.

(Honourable Member interjected)

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- You will have your chance to speak.

Mr. Speaker, while they have everyone looking at left-hand distracting the public with manufactured anxieties about land and rushing to draft a completely redundant Indigenous Rights Bill, the right hand is quietly emptying the pockets of our grandchildren.

The cold-hearted mathematical facts in this very Budget Address completely shatter their narrative. In 2026, public debt stood at \$4 billion. By the end of 2026, under this watch, the debt will skyrocket to nearly \$12 billion. This is a threefold increase. We are sitting on a debt-to-GDP ratio that is crawling towards 85 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, how did we get here? It is very simple. Total public spending exploded from

\$3 billion to an astronomical \$4.8 billion and where did that money go? Did it go to generational infrastructure? Did it go to pioneering industries? No. Operating expenditure more than doubled, completely devouring over 80 percent of our entire National Budget. Let that weight sink in.

While our revenue grew to nearly \$4 billion, the pace of reckless spending our credit completely. As a direct result, our interest servicing cost alone had doubled to almost \$600 million every year; that is \$600 million flushed down the drain annually just to pay for the privilege of their economic mismanagement. This is the psychological trap they built. They keep our communities trapped in emotional debates about identity, redundant legislation hoping no one notices that the country is financially bleeding out. They want our youth to stay blind to the math, but the math does not lie. It does not have political affiliations. You cannot claim to protect the people while simultaneously signing away their financial sovereignty to international lenders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, look at the operational bloated outlined in this Budget. The public sector has expanded to over 10,000 employees, costing our taxpayers over \$2.3 billion annually. This is nearly 50 percent of the entire National Budget; to take \$6 million every single day just to cover civil service salaries is quite significant. It does not stop there. It takes an additional \$3 million every single day just to pay for the office spaces, vehicles, fuel and official travel. We are spending \$9 million every single day just to keep the machinery of this bureaucracy breathing. Meanwhile, our roads and water systems are crumbling from a lack of total structural maintenance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our civil servants, teachers, nurses, technical officers and our small business owners - the very backbone of Fiji. These are the people who do not qualify for social welfare handouts, yet they are the ones carrying the heaviest tax burden of this entire nation. The Government has squeezed them dry for the last two years with aggressive taxes and now they want to offer crumbs in an election year and call it economic stimulus. What an absolute sample of disrespect.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, true economic stimulus does not mean taking money out of a worker's left pocket through high cost of living and inflation and then slipping a tiny tax concession on their right-hand pocket before any lesson. That is not an economic strategy. It is a magic trick. Real stimulus means increasing the purchasing power of the middle class so they can invest, build homes and grow local enterprises. When the middle class spends, the economy breathes. Instead, this archaic analogue of government has turned out a hardworking middle class into the working poor just to fund a \$9 million a day bureaucratic beast. However, fairness demands that I make one critical distinction. The failure of this experiment does not mean every single person on that side is blind to reality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I explicitly acknowledge the new honourable Minister for Finance. He has stepped into a structural minefield, and it is clear to those of us who look closely, that he is genuinely trying to bring sobriety, technical competence, and modern economic reasoning to a group that seems otherwise determined to live in the past. He is a good man trying to fix a broken machine. Sir, but one man cannot steer the ship alone when the rest of the crew is desperate to sail backward into old political tricks. To the rest of the frontbench, to those who prefer performance over substance, I remind you once more, the people of Fiji are groaning and they are waking up. If you feel exposed by these numbers and this truth, do not waste your breath shouting across the floor.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now wish to make some observations outlined in the fiscal update supplement. Domestically, structural challenges including skill shortages, rising living costs, infrastructure gaps, and fiscal imbalance continue to strain economic performance. While the post-pandemic recovery has stopped revenue growth, the fiscal position remains under significant strain due to rapid expenditure growth, persistent fiscal deficit and elevated public debt levels. Although the total expenditure has significantly increased, it is representing one of the fastest periods of expenditure growth in recent history. Much of this increase has been concentrated in operating

expenditure, which has grown to more than 50 percent.

The rapid growth in the current expenditure has also reduced the share of resources available for capital investment. As spending commitments have increasingly shifted towards spending, less fiscal resources have been available for infrastructure development. This trend has weakened the capacity for fiscal policy to support long-term economic transformation to improve productivity and strengthen Fiji's growth potentials.

Another longstanding structural challenge is the pro-cyclical nature of the fiscal policy. During a period of economic growth, expenditure has often expanded in line with rising revenues, rather than being used to rebuild fiscal buffers and strengthen resilience. I am taking all these comments from the honourable Minister's overview in the green book, and I am just basically making it known so that people can understand the situation that we are in.

Recent fuel supply disruptions and volatility in global energy markets have further exposed Fiji's vulnerability to external shocks. Underscoring the need to build buffers, create greater fiscal space, enhance the country's capacity to respond effectively to future crisis, while safeguarding the macro-economic stability.

Revenue reforms introduced in 2023-2024, particularly through high taxes, contributed to strong revenue performance, but also added to the inflationary pressures and increased living costs. Similarly, reprisal reverse tax measures, including the reduction of rates in 2025-2026, budget is estimated to have reduced Government revenue approximately \$200 million. However, the expected reduction in retail prices has not been fully realized, highlighting that tax reductions did not translate into lower consumer prices.

In the medium term, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government will face a significant financing challenge, with fiscal deficit projected to make up about 5 percent of GDP. However, access to such funding is becoming increasingly constrained, as development partners place greater emphasis on deeper structural governance and public financial management reforms. In this increasingly constrained financing environment, reducing financial deficit has become an economic necessity rather than a policy choice. Continued reliance on large deficit is neither sustainable nor prudent, given the limitations, both external and domestic financing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, achieving this objective 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 and the effectiveness of public service delivery, the size of civil service and the prioritization of expenditure must be addressed.

Given the limited scope for fiscal stimulus, the private sector must increasingly become the primary driver of economic growth, investment and job creation. The Government's role should focus on creating an enabling environment for private sector activity by addressing key constraints to productivity and competitiveness, while prioritizing investment in critical economic infrastructure.

The 2026-2027 Budget provides a net deficit of \$1.45 million, equivalent to 7 percent of GDP, compared to the expected 5 percent. As a result of the revised financial outlook, both debt and deficit levels are now expected to exceed the initial projections. The declining fiscal deficit in the immediate term reflects the Government's ongoing fiscal consolidation efforts. However, debt is projected to continue increasing over the medium term.

Improving the quality of public expenditure by increasing the share capital of expenditure relating to operative expenditure is important. This will support economic growth, enhance

productivity, strengthen the economy's productive capacity, through greater investment in critical infrastructure and other development priorities. There are few ways that the government could look at seriously:

- Widen the tax base by gradually removing exemptions;
- Improve tax compliance and collection of tax arrears by implementing digital tools;
- Continue efforts to make tax regime and tax administration simpler to encourage voluntary compliance;
- Review the VAT regime to move towards a single rate when the time is appropriate;
- Introduce targeted tax policies in potential inelastic markets to generate sufficient revenue required for development goals;
- Regularly report and budget tax expenditures on exemptions, concessions to promote transparency and build support for rationalizing such incentives;
- Introduce environmentally focused initiatives such as carbon taxes, incentives for sustainable business aligning with NDP; and
- Review non-tax revenues on a cost recovery basis while ensuring that vulnerable and disadvantaged are protected.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my seat, I would like to make a few comments on the statement that has been put on the floor on speakers before me. Honourable Kamikamica had reassured us that we should not panic, as there is \$8 billion worth of investments already in the pipeline.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Economic Affairs Committee is looking at Investment Fiji, and that pipeline investment is worrying as most of those investments have remained in the pipe. We have asked Investment Fiji to give us a breakdown of actuals on the ground, as many are stuck within that pipe. The honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation has spoken on tourism tax and Commercial Use of Marine Areas (CUMA) Bill. Tourism operators have called to discuss their frustration on these two initiatives. Most believe the negative effect of these initiatives will soon hit operators by October or latest in December.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to be very careful on our deteriorating debt level. If we do not, Fiji will find itself in a very difficult situation, where we will struggle to fund the interest on these loans. If we reach that stage, the consequences will be catastrophic. We have to look at Government State-Owned Enterprises that depend on Government guarantees. These include Fiji Sugar Corporation, Fiji Airways, Fiji Development Bank, and even Fiji National Provident Fund, which normally provides huge loans to Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Na Vualiku Project is a one that is estimated, the Government will borrow FJ\$400 million. Na Vualiku Project will add another \$400 million to our national debt. I ask the honourable Prime Minister to have a closer look at this project. Our Committee discovered some alarming signs on the execution of this very project. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity, and I thank the honourable Members for listening to my speech this afternoon.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and all Fijians who are tuning in from their various *Walesi* platform, *ni sa bula vinaka* and a very good afternoon to you all.

I rise today with humility, gratitude and a deep sense of responsibility to offer my whole-hearted support for the 2026-2027 National Budget debate. At the outset, I give thanks to the Lord Almighty for His continued grace upon our beloved Fiji. As a nation founded on endearing Christian values, we continue to draw strength from the principles of love, compassion, justice, humility and

service. These Christian values have enabled our multilingual and multiracial society live together peacefully and respectfully for generations. As we pursue economic growth and national development, let us never lose sight of those foundations that continue to unite us as Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I congratulate the honourable Prime Minister, Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka for his steadfast leadership. Under his guidance, this Coalition Government will no doubt reach a historic milestone by becoming Fiji's first Coalition administration to complete a full parliamentary term. This reflects political maturity, democratic stability and a shared commitment by political parties and independent MPs to national interest above political differences.

I also commend the honourable Minister for Finance for presenting a responsible and people-centred Budget in this trying global time. It balances fiscal discipline with strategic investment in healthcare, education, infrastructure, agriculture, tourism, climate resilience, national security and social protection. It demonstrates that economic growth must translate into better services and improve quality of life for every Fijian.

I sincerely thank the honourable Prime Minister for the confidence he has placed in me by appointing me as the Assistant Minister for Health and Medical Services. It has been one of the greatest honour of my professional and personal life to serve our nation in this capacity. I also acknowledge my line Minister, the honourable Dr. Ratu Atonio Lalabalavu, for his exemplary leadership, together with our Acting Permanent Secretary, our senior management and every dedicated officer within the Ministry. I pay tribute to every doctor, nurse, pharmacist, dentist, allied health professional, administrator and support staff serving throughout Fiji's public health sector. Your professionalism, compassion and sacrifice remain the backbone of our health system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also acknowledge Fiji's growing international leadership under the honourable Prime Minister, including the recent establishment of Fiji's Embassy in Jerusalem and the opening of the Embassy of the State of Israel in Suva. This reflects Fiji's commitment to peace, friendship and constructive engagement with deep and practical health co-operation and sovereignty. For many Christians throughout Fiji, this development carries profound spiritual significance. It reflects our respect for the historical and biblical importance of Jerusalem. As we continue to strengthen friendship with all nations, we must remain true to our values by declaring Fiji as a Christian nation. As the Scripture reminds us, as part of the Abraham's blessing and I quote: "Genesis 12: 3: I will bless those who bless you." May God continue to bless Fiji with wisdom, peace and prosperity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is far more than an appropriation of Government expenditure, it is a statement of confidence in our nation's future. While no government inherits a perfect system, this Coalition Government has confronted long-standing structure and system challenges with honesty, transparency and practical action. Across every sector, we are rebuilding confidence through responsible investment, stronger governance and better public services. Nowhere is that commitment more evident than in healthcare.

Health is not merely expenditure; it is an investment. Every healthy child learns better. Every healthy worker strengthens our economy and contributes well. Every healthy family strengthens our community and every dollar invested in prevention today, reduces the cost of treatment tomorrow. That is why I commend the allocation of \$647 million to drive major health transformation, including \$477 million to fund salaries for doctors, nurses, frontline healthcare services, recruit more staff, improve access to specialist care, and the procurement of medicine and biomedical equipment.

With an additional \$41 million as initial funding for the Pacific Healthy Islands Transformation Project. That reflects this Government's unwavering commitment to building a

stronger, more resilient, and people-centred health system. Our vision is clear. Through primary healthcare and universal health coverage, we are bringing healthcare closer to our communities, by strengthening prevention, early detection, early intervention, and health promotion and community participation.

Central to this transformation is the Pacific Healthy Islands Transformation Programme, supported by the World Bank, ADB, and the OPEC Fund. This programme represents the largest health sector investment in Fiji's history. It will strengthen primary healthcare, modernise digital health system, improve workforce capacity, and build climate-resilient infrastructure and enhance governance for generations to come.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, throughout my tenure, I have made it a priority to spend more time on the ground. I have travelled extensively across the Central, Western, Northern and the Maritime Divisions, visiting hospitals, health centres and nursing stations, meeting our health professionals and listening directly to patients and communities. These visits have reinforced one simple truth, that effective leadership begins by listening.

Across Fiji, I have witnessed significant progress. Hospitals are receiving long-overdue electrical upgrades, improved medical gas line systems, EFL transformer upgrades, refurbished operating theatres, upgraded lifts and modern biomedical equipment. Labasa Hospital's major infrastructure work continues to prepare for expanded specialist services. At the Colonial War Memorial Hospital, investment continues at the operating theatre, at the Children's Hospital and other essential infrastructure. The construction of the KOICA-funded National Rehabilitation Centre at Tamavua is progressing well and will significantly improve physical rehabilitation for our people.

Beyond our major hospitals, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government continues to invest in rural and maritime facilities through upgraded health centres, nursing stations, staff quarters, water and sanitation systems, disability access in the clinics and reliable electricity and digital connectivity. These are not luxuries; they are essential services that every community deserves. We are also strengthening climate resilient health infrastructure through solar power installation, reliable backup generators and improved energy systems, ensuring continuity of care during natural disasters and emergencies. Across critical areas in Fiji, modern mortuary facilities are also being expanded so that every Fijian is treated with dignity and respect.

Healthcare is ultimately about people. That is why this Government continues to invest in our workforce through improved working environment, proper accommodation, professional development and modern equipment. While recruitment and retention remain ongoing challenges, we are addressing this systematically to build a stronger and more sustainable health workforce.

One of the most pressing public health challenges facing Fiji is the HIV outbreak. This Government has responded openly, compassionately and decisively through expanded testing, treatment, prevention, harm reduction and stronger partnership with civil society, faith-based organisations and development partners. Mr. Speaker, Sir, HIV demands a whole-of-Government and a whole-of-society response, and that remains our commitment.

Healthcare is also changing rapidly. Digital health, telemedicine, artificial intelligence and modern diagnostic technologies are transforming our healthcare delivery worldwide.

Through this Budget, Fiji is laying a firm foundation by investing today in a health system that is more innovative, resilient and equitable, while ensuring that rural communities are not left behind. Every new health facility, every upgraded hospital, every ambulance, every biomedical

device, every trained healthcare worker, every immunised child and every life saved represents a real return on investment by the Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no nation can succeed alone. Over the past years, I have had the privilege of representing Fiji at the World Health Assembly and some regional health forums. These engagements have strengthened Fiji's reputation as a respected voice on Primary Health Care and Universal Health Coverage, climate resilient health systems and the priorities of Small Island Developing States.

Our partnership with the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Bank, Asia Development Bank (ADB), Australia, New Zealand, Japan, India, KOICA and the People's Republic of China, the UN Agencies and many other partners, continue to deliver practical outcomes to the people of Fiji through infrastructure, workforce development, renewable energy, digital transformation, disease surveillance and public health preparedness. Internationally, diplomacy must produce real benefits for ordinary Fijians. I thank all of our development partners for respecting Fiji's leadership and supporting our national priorities in the healthcare sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also acknowledge the important contributions of our faith-based organisations, non-government organisations, our traditional leaders, municipal councils, private healthcare providers, the community at large and volunteers. Building a healthier Fiji is a shared responsibility that requires the participation of every sector of society.

As I travelled through Fiji, I witnessed dedicated healthcare workers serving with compassion, communities taking ownership of their health facilities and development partners working alongside Government. These experiences reminded me that while infrastructure and technology matter, the true strength of our health system lies in the people who serve and the communities they serve.

This Budget invests in healthier mothers, safer childbirth, healthier children, stronger mental health services, better care for our elderly, improved working environments for the frontline staff and resilient health infrastructure capable of withstanding future challenges. The journey ahead will not be without difficulties. Workforce shortages, ageing infrastructure and changing disease patterns will continue to test us. However, this Budget provided a clear roadmap for building a stronger, more equitable and more resilient health system for future generations.

In closing, I thank the honourable Prime Minister for his visionary leadership, the honourable Minister for Finance for presenting this responsible Budget and the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services for his steadfast leadership of our Ministry.

I also thank our Acting Permanent Secretary, senior management, every staff of the Ministry, our development partners and every healthcare professional serving throughout Fiji. Your dedication continues to inspire our nation.

Finally, I thank the people of Fiji for your patience, reliance and trust. This Budget belongs to you. It reflects your aspirations and our shared determination to build a healthier, stronger and more prosperous Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I conclude with the words of Psalm 127:1 "Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain." May the Almighty God, Jehovah, continue to bless this Parliament, guide our nation, and bless the people of Fiji.

With those remarks, Mr. Speaker, I wholeheartedly support the 2026-2027 National Budget that is before the House. *Vinaka vakalevu, Dhanivaad, Sukriya* and thank you.

HON. T.R. MATASAWALEVU.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen watching the livestream from their television; I rise to contribute to the National Budget 2026-2027 National Budget debate, with particular focus on rural development, agricultural development and the important role of our young people in nation building.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to speak in the vernacular.

Au vakabula saka tiko yani ena nodatou yasana e tinikava ena noda vanua, wili kina na wekada mai Rotuma kei na veimata-tamata eda lewena saka tiko na noda Viti lomani. Eda vakavinavinaka ni sa mai kacivaka oti na noda Minister ni Veika Vaka-i-Lavo na noda i tuvatuva vaka-i-lavo ni 2026-2027. Au via vakadeitaki keda na tu ena taudaku ni veikoro lelevu, vakabibi o keda eda bula tu ena veikorokoro vaka-Viti, ni dau vuqa na gauna eda dau vakaweleweletaka na kena kacivaki na noda i tukutuku vakailavo ni Matanitu. Au via vakamamasu nikua vei keda meda yalo vinaka meda vodo vata kei na Matanitu, me kua ni dua e lutu ki muri ena gaunisala ni veivakatoroicaketaki eda sa donumaka tiko nikua. Na veiqaravi ni noda Matanitu e baleti keda kece sara na lewenivanua.

On rural development, rural communities are the backbone of our nation. Many families in rural and maritime areas face ongoing challenges in assessing reliable roads, clean water, electricity, telecommunications, healthcare and quality education.

I firmly support increased investment in rural infrastructure, as it is essential for improving the livelihoods of our people. Better roads allow farmers to transport their produce more efficiently, boosting their income. Enhanced water and electricity services improve living standards and open up new opportunities for small businesses. Expanding digital connectivity ensures that rural communities are not left behind in our increasingly digital economy.

The 2026-2027 Budget must prioritise upgrading and maintaining of rural roads, farm access roads, access to clean and safe drinking water, rural electrification and renewable energy projects, improved healthcare facilities and expansions of internet and telecommunication services. When our rural communities thrive, the entire nation benefits, so it is time that we put rural development at the heart of our agenda.

On the development of agriculture in rural areas, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I appreciate the budgetary allocation to the Ministry of Agriculture, Waterways and Sugar Industry, especially for the Agriculture Marketing Authority (AMA) and the non-sugar sector. As a farmer, this issue is very close to my heart. This allocation shows a positive move towards supporting the non-sugar sector and empowering AMA, but I believe it is still insufficient.

The harvest of *tausala* and *uro ni vonu* are often manipulated by private *dalo* exporters. They are our main problem during our harvest, paying as little as a dollar per kilogramme which is below our break-even point. Our harvest seasons are regular and plentiful, but middlemen buy our produce at prices that leave us with no profits. Three consecutive harvests have been drained by these middlemen, leaving farmers without cash reserves.

Many farmers are forced to abandon their farms or take loans from loan sharks, as banks like FDB are seldom able to help in these situations. I urge the Government to strengthen the AMA further to protect farmers, to ensure fair prices and support rural agriculture development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, agriculture remains a critical pillar of our economy and a primary source of income for many rural households. I thank the Government for continually investing in programmes that support farmers through access to modern farming equipment and technology, affordable agriculture loans and grants, improved farm-to-market roads, training and extension services, climate resilience farming practice and support for value-added agriculture products. We must encourage diversification beyond traditional crops and create opportunities in livestock, fisheries, horticulture and agro-processing industries.

Agriculture not only strengthens food security, but also creates employment, generate income and contributes to economic growth. By empowering our farmers, we empower our rural communities and strengthen national resilience.

On the importance of our young people, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our youth are our greatest asset and future leaders of our country. I thank the Government for continuing to invest in youth development by providing better education and vocational training opportunities, scholarships and skills development programmes, youth entrepreneurship support, access to digital technology and innovation programmes, employment and internships opportunities, sports and community development initiatives.

Many young people in rural areas possess enormous potential but often lack access to resources and opportunities. We must ensure that they are included in national development efforts and given the tools to succeed. By investing in our youth today, we are investing in a stronger, more productive and more prosperous nation tomorrow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have listened carefully to the honourable Leader of the Opposition's contribution. While I respect his views, I respectfully disagree with his assessment of this Budget. It is easy to point out problems, but the real responsibility of the Government is to provide solutions. That is exactly what this Budget does.

(Honourable Opposition Members interjected)

HON. T.R. MATASAWALEVU.- Please, do not criticise this young politician.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we acknowledge the important contribution of Fijians working abroad. Their remittances support families and help our economy. However, remittances alone cannot drive Fiji's long-term development. Our focus must be on creating opportunities here at home. That is why this Government continues to invest in education, health, infrastructure, agriculture, tourism and small businesses. These are the investments that create jobs, improve services and strengthen our economy.

The Opposition has also raised concerns about debt and spending. Let me say this clearly, responsible governments do not stop investing when times are difficult. They invest wisely in projects that improve people's lives and build a stronger future. This Budget does exactly that by supporting roads, hospitals, schools, clean water, and other essential services. This is a responsible, practical, people-focused Budget. It provides relief for families, supports growth and continues building Fiji's future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe that for our country to grow sustainably, we need stronger rural communities, a thriving farmer sector, and empowered young people. I support more investment in rural roads, farming and programmes to help young people. These steps will create jobs, reduce inequality, improve food security and make life better for everyone. We do not have to

point fingers at each other. We are here as Members of Parliament to work together and to build our nation.

With those remarks, I proudly stand in support of this Budget. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. *Vinaka saka vakalevu.*

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, this is a convenient point to suspend our proceedings for a short break. Parliament will resume in half an hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.19 p.m.

The Parliament resumed 5.05p.m.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; *nu sa cola vina*.

I rise today in proud support of the 2026-2027 National Budget, appropriately titled, “A Responsible Budget for a Sustainable Future”. At the outset, I give thanks to the Almighty God for His continued guidance and blessings. Through His grace, we are given the wisdom, strength and humility to serve the people of Fiji.

I also commend the honourable Prime Minister for his visionary leadership and steadfast commitment in advancing the interests of the people. Under his leadership –

- Fiji regained its media freedom.
- A 33-year struggle in Vatukoula, one of the longest-running industrial disputes in the world, was finally brought to a close.
- The former Prime Minister Qarase’s bodyguard, Ratu Jone Raravisa, was able to return to Fiji after living in exile, worried about his own safety.
- More than 53,000 students were relieved of their outstanding TSLS debts.

These achievements, together with many others, reflect a leadership committed to justice, reconciliation and progress.

I acknowledge the honourable Minister of Finance, together with the Officials of his Ministry, for presenting a budget that demonstrates responsible leadership at a time when the global economy continues to face significant uncertainty.

As Minister for Youth and Sports, I would also like to commend the Coalition Government in its unwavering dedication to the development of youth and sports in our global nation.

MR. SPEAKER.- One moment, I will issue you with a yellow card. Stop talking when a Member is on the floor speaking. This is not a market for you to talk to one another. Thank you. You may continue.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there has been considerable commentary surrounding Government’s borrowing and national debt.

Some critics continue to paint a picture of financial instability. However, the facts tell a different story. The Fiji Government continues to service its debt while simultaneously investing in critical sectors such as health, education, infrastructure, climate resilience, youth and sports.

This Budget has been prepared against a backdrop of continuing global economic uncertainty. Geo-political tensions, inflationary pressures, volatile fuel prices and the growing impacts of climate change continue to challenge economies worldwide, particularly Small Island Developing States such as Fiji.

Despite these external pressures, Fiji has remained resilient. Following the Budget announcement, I was asked by the media whether the Ministry of Youth and Sports was satisfied with its allocation for the new financial year. My response was straightforward and remains unchanged, and I quote, “We are content with the budget allocated.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government has many competing priorities, and every Ministry plays a pivotal role in delivering services to our people. Our responsibility is therefore not measured by the size of our location, but by the results we deliver.

We remain committed to ensuring that every dollar entrusted to the Ministry is utilised efficiently, transparently, and responsibly to maximise opportunities for our young people, strengthen our sporting sector, and deliver meaningful outcomes for communities across Fiji. On youth development: youth development remains one of the Coalition Government's most important national priorities. Because the future prosperity of Fiji will ultimately depend on the capability, character, and resilience of our young people.

Today, almost one-third of Fiji's population is between the ages of 15 and 35 years. This demographic presents both a tremendous opportunity and a significant responsibility. If we invest wisely in our young people today, we will build a skilled workforce, stronger communities, and a more resilient economy tomorrow.

Guided by the National Youth Policy of 2023-2027, this Budget continues Government's commitment to empowering young people through education, leadership, skills development, and meaningful participation in national development.

Investing in leadership and active citizenship: developing future leaders requires more than classroom learning. It requires opportunities for young people to serve, lead, and contribute positively within their communities. This Budget, therefore, continues to invest in programmes that strengthen leadership, volunteerism, and civic responsibility among young people.

A total of \$656,000 has been allocated for the Youth Capacity Building and Training Programme, enabling the Ministry to continue delivering leadership development, entrepreneurship training, financial literacy, youth empowerment, and community engagement initiatives throughout the country. These programmes equip young people with practical skills while nurturing confidence, responsibility, and a spirit of service that will benefit both the communities and the nation.

Government also continues to support internationally recognised youth development programmes. An allocation of \$20,000 has been provided for the Duke of Edinburgh's International Award, enabling more young people to develop leadership, teamwork, resilience, and community service through structured personal development activities.

In addition, \$40,000 has been allocated for youth seminars and workshops, providing opportunities for youth leaders, organisations and stakeholders to strengthen their knowledge, share experiences and build partnerships that contribute to national development. Investing in skills and employment is one of the Ministry's most important responsibilities to prepare young people for productive employment.

The Government recognises that equipping young people with practical skills is one of the most effective ways of reducing unemployment, supporting entrepreneurship and improving livelihoods. Through our network of youth training centers at Valelevu, Nasau, Naleba, Naqere and Yavitu in Kadavu, young people continue to receive practical vocational training, life skills and second chance educational opportunities that enable them to enter the workforce with confidence. This Budget continues to strengthen these centers by providing resources to improve programme delivery and training facilities.

Funding has been allocated for the continued maintenance and improvement of youth training centers, including \$150,000 for minor capital improvements and \$240,000 for youth centre trainings.

These investments ensure that trainees receive quality hands-on learning in agriculture, carpentry, hospitality, creative arts and other vocational disciplines that respond directly to the needs of the economy. The success of these centres is measured not by the number of courses delivered, but by the lives they transform.

Investing in resilient communities: Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government is equally committed to supporting young people to become responsible citizens, capable of making informed decisions and contributing positively to society. Through provincial youth festivals and community outreach programmes, the Ministry continues taking government services directly to young people across Fiji. The Ministry will also continue working closely with law enforcement agencies, faith-based organisations, provincial councils and the development partners to address emerging challenges affecting young people, including substance abuse, violence and social exclusion.

The Budget further supports these efforts through targeted funding, including \$10,000 to support the implementation of the National Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence Against Women and Girls, recognising that youth development must also contribute to building safe, respectful and inclusive communities. While investing in our young people lays the foundation for Fiji's future, sports remain one of the most powerful vehicles through which that potential can be realised.

Sports Development: Mr. Speaker, Sir, sport has always been one of Fiji's greatest strengths. It unites our people, inspires national pride and provides opportunities for individuals to excel both on and off the field. Today, Government recognises sport as much more than competition. It is a catalyst for healthier lifestyles, stronger communities, economic growth and international recognition.

The Government believes that every Fijian should have the opportunity to participate in sports, regardless of age, gender, physical ability or where they live. Broad participation forms the foundation of sporting excellence and encourages healthier, more active communities.

This Budget strengthens grassroots sports through a \$250,000 allocation for the Sports Outreach Programme, bringing coaching clinics and organised sporting activities into communities throughout Fiji. A further \$195,652 has been allocated to support community sports associations, recognising their important role in identifying talent and promoting participation at the local level, and expanding sporting opportunities for persons living with disabilities, reaffirming Government's commitment that no one should be excluded from the benefits of sports.

Quality facilities are equally important. The Budget therefore allocates \$300,000 for the construction of multi-purpose hardcourts and a further \$300,000 for the upgrading of sports grounds. These investments create safe and accessible spaces where communities can participate in sport, nurture young talents and promote healthier lifestyles.

Investing in Excellence: While participation builds the foundation, excellence requires sustained investment. The Government remains committed to developing athletes capable of competing successfully on the regional and international stage through quality coaching, athlete support and regular international competition. Accordingly, this Budget provides approximately \$2.19 million for the engagement of sports coaches, ensuring athletes receive the technical guidance required to reach their full potential. The Government has also allocated approximately \$185,869 for sports scholarships, supporting talented athletes to pursue both education and sporting excellence.

In addition, approximately \$5.88 million has been allocated for overseas sporting tours, enabling national teams to gain valuable international competition exposure while preparing for major events, particularly the 2027 Pacific Games in Tahiti. These investments demonstrate

Government's determination to ensure Team Fiji remains competitive and continues to perform with distinction on the international stage.

Investing in Integrity: Government believes that sporting success must always be built upon integrity, accountability and respect for international standards. One of the landmark initiatives in this budget is the strengthening of Drug-Free Sports Fiji, supported through an allocation of approximately \$405,000. This investment reinforces our commitment to clean sport and athlete welfare. Drug-free Sports Fiji will strengthen athlete education, testing and compliance, while ensuring Fiji continues to meet its international obligations under the World Anti-Doping Code.

Government also continues to strengthen sports governance through support for the Fiji National Sports Commission, which receives approximately \$1.08 million to enhance governance, athlete development and organisational capacity across national sporting organisations. These investments reinforce public confidence and ensure that Fiji's sporting achievements continue to be built on integrity and good governance.

Investing Sports Economy: One of the defining features of this budget is its recognition that sport is an important contributor to Fiji's economy. Beyond competition, sport supports tourism, employment, investment and business development, while enhancing Fiji's international profile. To capitalise on these opportunities, Government has allocated \$3 million towards hosting international sporting tournaments, recognising their contribution to tourism, hospitality, transport and local businesses. These events not only showcase Fiji internationally but also generate significant economic activity throughout the country.

Government is also encouraging greater private sector investment through progressive taxation incentives. Businesses establishing new sporting facilities will benefit from a 150 percent tax deduction, encouraging investment in quality sporting infrastructure. Similarly, qualifying sponsorships of Bula FC of at least \$100,000 will attract a 200 percent tax deduction, while the sponsorship threshold for the Fiji Drua has been reduced from \$250,000 to \$100,000, with the enhanced deduction maintained. These measures encourage stronger partnerships between government and the private sector, while strengthening the long-term sustainability of sport.

The budget further supports sporting infrastructure through \$1 million in operational funding and \$1.75 million capital grant for the Fiji Sports Council. Looking ahead, the Ministry remains committed to progressing the establishment of the Fiji Institute of Sports, which will strengthen sports science, coaching, research and high-performance development ensuring Fiji remains internationally competitive well into the future.

Together, these investments demonstrate Government's comprehensive vision for sport - broadens participation, develops excellence, protects integrity and unlocks sport's growing contribution to national development and economic prosperity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the success of this budget will depend not only on Government's investment, but also on the strength of partnerships that support its implementation. The Ministry will continue working closely with schools, faith-based organisations, provincial councils, national sporting organisations, development partners, the private sector and communities to ensure every programme delivers meaningful outcomes for our young people and athletes.

In conclusion, Sir, this budget reflects a government that continues to invest responsibly in Fiji's greatest assets; its people. Through strategic investments in youth development and sport, we are creating opportunities, strengthening communities and building a healthier and more resilient nation.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to pay tribute to the late Youth Officer for Kadavu, Mr. Joseva Tuqiri, who hailed from Votua, Lekutu, in Bua. Mr. Tuqiri's dedicated service touched the lives of countless young people throughout the Central and Eastern Divisions, particularly in the province of Kadavu. His commitment to empowering our youth and strengthening our communities will be remembered with deep appreciation. *Vina valevu sara mudou na nomu vei qaravi yalodina ena vukudra na i tabagone, ni qai gole saka ena vakacegu.*

Mr. Speaker, I also extend my heartfelt congratulations and best wishes to the 58-member Team Fiji athletes and officials who will proudly represent our nation at the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow. As you carry the hopes and pride of every Fijian, we wish you every success. Go with God, compete with courage, and make our nation proud.

Finally, I acknowledge and thank the Fiji Water Flying Fijians for their performances in the Nations Cup and proudly flying the Fiji flag on the international stage. We recognise that the competition has been intense, but we also know that the Fijian spirit is one of resilience, determination and courage. We have every confidence that you will come back stronger. *Toso Viti Toso!*

Mr. Speaker, please allow me to make a very brief response to honourable Rinesh Sharma. My question to the honourable Member, is he once again accusing me in this honourable House, despite the fact that I have been cleared of the allegations made against me? With due respect, I sincerely hope that the honourable Member understands how the democratic system and the rule of law operate in this country, particularly that once a matter has been properly addressed and resolved through the proper process, it should not be misrepresented in this House. I extend my sincere appreciation to you, Sir, and I thank you.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, Members of Parliament, *bula vinaka* and *namaste*. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in support of the 2026-2027 National Budget under the theme, "A Responsible Budget for Sustainable Future".

At the outset, I acknowledge the honourable Prime Minister and congratulate the honourable Minister for Finance for presenting a Budget that responds to Fiji's fiscal realities and the current fuel crisis while supporting sustainable economic growth. I also wish to express my appreciation to the Permanent Secretary and his team for a balanced Budget.

As Minister for Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations, I welcome the Budget's strong focus on productivity, skills development and employment. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2026-2027 National Budget responds to ongoing fiscal challenges through prudent financial management and strategic investment to strengthen productivity and long-term economic growth. This Budget promotes fiscal responsibility by ensuring public funds are invested efficiently in initiatives that create jobs, boost productivity and deliver lasting benefits to all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister for Finance has challenged every Ministry to do more with less through good governance. This means embracing innovation, digital transformation, efficient service delivery and stronger performance to maximise the value of public resources. This aligns with the Ministry's mandate to improve productivity and improve skills, technology and better workplace practises, delivering better outcomes through smarter service, stronger partnerships and greater accountability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, responsible fiscal management is about safeguarding the future and by

balancing today's priorities with long-term investments in education, healthcare, infrastructure and employment, ensuring that the future generations inherit a stronger and more resilient and prosperous Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget supports private sector growth through sound economic management, workforce development and labour reforms, with the Ministry continuing to promote productivity, decent work and a competitive economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the most significant reforms is the decision to recalibrate the NTPC levy. From 1st January, 2027, 50 percent of the levy will be directed towards training and skills development, representing a substantial increase in investment in our workforce.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it demonstrates the Government's recognition that addressing Fiji's skill shortage requires sustained investment in the development of our people. It will enable more workers to acquire industry-relevant skills, improve workplace productivity, strengthen innovation and remain competitive as industries continue to evolve.

Before outlining the Ministry's priorities for 2026-2027, I am pleased to report that my Ministry utilised just over 92 percent of its budget, translating public resources into tangible outcomes for workers, employers and the people of Fiji. This reflects prudent financial management and effective implementation of our mandate to promote decent work and sustainable employment for all.

Since assuming office, the Ministry has delivered significant reforms to strengthen Fiji's labour market. We revitalized the Employment Relations Advisory Board, restoring tripartite dialogue between the government, employers and workers, improving the toxic work environment which we had inherited while progressing comprehensive labour review.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Employment Relations Act 2007 and the Essential Industries Act were aligned to international standards and restored the rights of workers. The retirement age for civil servants was increased from 55 to 60 and the contracts were converted into tenure. I think this was a sigh of relief from all civil servants when we implemented this because prior to that, the imposed contractual appointments had no guarantee when they would go home, and many casualties are out there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, civil servants also received a 10 percent to 23 percent salary increase which is the highest ever without a Job Evaluation Exercise (JEE). The last increase was in 2017; there was a six-year drought. We increased the national minimum wage from \$3.67 to \$5 per hour within three years; a 36 percent increase and the sectoral wages also increased by \$1 per hour. We expanded employment opportunities through job fairs, workplace attachments, incentivised apprenticeship scheme, et cetera.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition is correct that Fiji faces skills shortage, but what is more important is to identify the real causes. The shortage did not begin with the PALM or RSE Schemes. These programmes primarily recruit unskilled Fijian workers from mainly rural villages while professional and skilled tradespeople migrate independently through skilled migration pathways.

A key contributor, of course, to today's shortage was the closure of the technical colleges and the decline in technical vocational training for several years. Mr. Speaker, Sir, when they opened the technical colleges in 2014-2015, I alluded to this in this House, then they closed all those that were attached to the secondary schools and in 2018-2019, they closed all the technical colleges and there

was nothing left. Of course, in the process, taxpayers lost \$30 million plus.

This Government has taken decisive action by reopening the Technical Colleges, reviving Vocational Centres, expanding apprenticeship, workplace attachments and strengthening employment and workforce development programmes to rebuild Fiji's skills pipeline.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also strengthened labour mobility through the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) and the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) Schemes, enhanced worker welfare through the appointment of five Country Liaison Officers. These Liaison Officers look after our workers out there in Australia and New Zealand. We also have a reintegration programme for the returnees, apart from the pre-departure training that we have strengthened.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in Occupational Health and Safety (OHS), the Ministry reviewed the 'No Jab No Job' policy and many were able to return to work. We supported businessNow FIJI in the building permit approval system to substantially reduce the turnaround time.

We have progressed the Work Care Bill to modernise Fiji's workers' compensation framework with more focus on process efficiency and rehabilitation. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a result of this, we have saved Government billions of dollars that were being paid to private service providers.

The Ministry has also accelerated digital transformation, the in-country recruitment database, local employment registration system, paperless labour inspection system, and is currently in the process of digitalising around 36 occupational health and safety manual processes to improve efficiency and customer service.

Recently, Fiji strengthened its leadership by hosting the 2025 Pacific Regional High Level Tripartite Employment Forum, the Pacific Senior Labour Officials' Meeting and the inaugural Pacific Labour Ministers' Meeting, resulting in the Pacific Labour Ministers' Charter, the Just Work Plan 2026 to 2030, and the proposal for an ILO Pacific Cluster where Fiji represented the Pacific Island Ministers at the International Labour Conference.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2026-2027 Budget provides us with an opportunity, not only to continue the momentum from the past three Budgets, but to accelerate policies that will address skills shortage, strengthen productivity, improve workplace safety, create sustainable employment opportunities, and build a more competitive and resilient labour market for the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has been allocated \$14.9 million in the 2026-2027 financial year. The allocation reflects Government's confidence in the Ministry's significant role in creating employment opportunities, improving labour market outcomes, promoting productivity, protecting workers and supporting national economic development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the Ministry is proud of what has been achieved during the past three financial years, the 2026-2027 National Budget positions us to go even further in building a stronger and more resilient and globally competitive workforce.

Allow me to outline the key funding allocations under the Ministry's 2026-2027 Budget. Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$4.92 million has been allocated to strengthen corporate governance, financial management, digital transformation and operational support across the Ministry. This includes the Vatukoula Gold Mine Strike Settlement, as well as funding digital transformation, ISO quality management systems, administration and public awareness initiatives to improve the Ministry's efficiency and service delivery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to improve enforcement and compliance with labour standards, the Ministry has been allocated \$1.91 million to continue safeguarding workers' rights and promoting fair, productive and harmonious workplaces. Since January 2023, more than 10,000 workplace inspections and compliance audits have been undertaken. These enforcement efforts have led to the recovery of some \$4 million in unpaid wages and employment entitlements for affected workers as at 30th March, 2026.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the budget provides \$100,000 specifically to undertake a review of the National Minimum Wage and the 10 Sectorial Wages. This exercise will commence soon. While honourable Members of the Opposition have been criticising Government for not taking care of workers, they have conveniently overlooked this issue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Work Safety and Health, the Ministry receives \$3.72 million, demonstrating Government's continued commitment to protecting the health, safety and wellbeing of Fiji's workers. Within this allocation, \$1 million has been specifically provided for workers' compensation payout to injured workers and dependents of deceased workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has been allocated \$2.51 million to strengthen local and overseas employment opportunities, improve workforce readiness, expand digital employment services and re-integration support for returning workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in supporting the Good Faith Dialogue, the Mediation Services has been allocated \$913,789 to strengthen the continued promotion of peaceful industrial relations and timely resolution of employment disputes and grievances. Included within this allocation is \$73,370 to strengthen mediation capacity through collaboration with the Singapore Mediation Centre, supporting internationally recognised dispute resolution practices and reducing costly industrial disputes. The House would note that since taking office, our Government has prevented any major strike. We have been able to resolve problems and disputes through this mechanism.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has been allocated \$899,358 to strengthen national productivity, labour market research and workforce competitiveness. As Fiji faces growing skills shortages, the Ministry will continue to strengthen labour market research, productivity initiatives and employment services, while advancing labour laws, workplace safety and industrial relations reforms to support skilled, productive and competitive workforce.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry also welcomes the introduction of a new 200 percent tax deduction for eligible employer expenditure on employing, training and upskilling. This forward-looking incentive encourages employers to invest directly in the development of their workforce and recognises that workforce development is a shared responsibility between workers, employers and Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when businesses invest in people, productivity improves, enterprises become more competitive, workers earn more and our national economy becomes stronger. This Budget demonstrates that even during difficult physical circumstances, Government continues to prioritise investment in people. Every job created strengthens a family. Every safe workplace protects a worker. Every productive enterprise strengthens the economy. Every skilled worker strengthens Fiji's future. My Ministry remains fully committed to delivering these outcomes efficiently, responsibly and transparently.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I conclude, I would like to respond to some of the comments from our colleagues on the other side. Unemployment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry now has created a portal to register job seekers, and we are in the process of getting the portal for employers done. But

as I speak, any job seeker can come and register with our National Employment Centre, and we find jobs for them. To identify employers that are looking for workers. There was a lot of discussion on FNPF - the reduction of 2 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2020, there was a reduction from 18 percent to 10 percent - 5 percent worker and 5 percent employer. In 2022, it went up to 12 percent; 2023 - 14 percent; 2024 - we fully restored it to 18 percent. I am sure that when everything stabilizes, the honourable Minister of Finance is going to revert to the normal rate of deduction of contribution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Lal, honourable Chand and a few others, have been talking about us not caring about workers. The civil servants, the hourly paid workers, all of them, are happy because of what we have done for them.

There was a comment made by honourable Pillay, criticising the FSC workers. Mr. Speaker, Sir, all workers must be treated with dignity, whether they are senior staff or junior staff.

In the previous administration, there were expatriate General Managers or CEOs who were paid around a million dollars – package of three quarter million. One was staying in Denarau and \$2,000 rent was paid by FSC. The current CEO is probably paid 25 percent of that, so our local workers are all there and I implore people to respect them.

Mr. Speaker, I commend this Budget to the House, and I reaffirm the Ministry's commitment to working with all partners to build a more productive, competitive, and prosperous Fiji.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think this is a much-anticipated speech that everyone is looking forward to listen to. Honourable Koroilavesau is already pointing at me. Do not point at me!

However, I will tell you one thing. In today's *Fiji Sun*, it says something about a very big message by the honourable Leader of the Opposition leader - Cut the Civil Service! Where do you start from then?

At one stage, you want the Government to run properly, and then you cut the civil servants. There are 34,000 civil servants in this country.

(Honourable Member interjected)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Listen to me!

There are 34,000 civil servants in this country, multiply that by 10 it comes to 340,000 votes, but you will not get a single vote. Believe me now!

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Come on, which party do you belong to?

(Honourable Member interjected)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- No, because the paper said that, believe me. Yes, *Fiji Sun* said that, and we did not believe *Fiji Sun* until today. I apologise, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- Carry on, proceed with your speech.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- I will carry on. I will make him accountable tonight, honourable Sharma as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition - I respect you, Sir, honourable Members of the House, ladies and gentlemen, viewers who are watching online from the different parts of the world; good afternoon, *bula vinaka* and namaste to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver my contribution in support of the 2026-27 Budget. The 2026-2027 National Budget reflects the Coalition Government's vision of a stronger, more prosperous, and a more united Fiji. It recognises the lasting national development it built upon three enduring pillars – a strong economy, cohesive communities, and a shared national identity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the honourable Minister for Finance said about his new Budget, they were complaining about honourable Professor Prasad's budget. You know, when a child grows, he is first given a small dose of something. Then it comes to the next level and third level, and we have come to the fourth level, we are giving a dosage to this country that you have never expected.

Business grows with loans. You have never been in a business. You will never grow in a business. I will tell you, you will exit in the next election.

We are investing in programmes that foster inclusion, mutual respect and social cohesion across our diverse communities. We are preserving our culture, heritage, and artistic traditions. Not only are they symbols of our past, but strategic assets that enrich our national identity, strengthen our tourism, create economic opportunities and inspire future generations.

(Honourable Member interjected)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Who are you talking about? You are the same person sitting in the Grand Eastern Hotel and complaining about Sayed-Khaiyum. What are you complaining about now?

(Laughter)

Together, these investments ensure that every Fijian, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or cultural background could contribute and benefit from our nation's development.

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Do not laugh! You are not even worth laughing about.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me start with public enterprises. Public enterprises are more than commercial entities.

(Honourable Opposition Member interjected)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Now, you are like a school student. Listen!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Hey, you were hog-washing for 16 years!

Public enterprises are more than commercial entities. They are strategic national assets that

drive economic growth, create employment and deliver essential...

MR. SPEAKER.- Can I just interrupt? We have a long way to go so, please, allow the Minister to speak unimpeded.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is my third page and there are 17 more pages to go. Let them have patience.

... services and generated returns that benefit all Fijians. This Budget reinforces the Coalition Government's commitment to strengthening these institutions through an allocation of \$5.7 million to the Ministry of Public Enterprises.

With significant public investment comes an equally significant responsibility. The Government, through the Ministry of Public Enterprises, is committed to ensuring that our 13 public enterprises operate with the highest standards of governance, which was never there before, accountability and commercial discipline. Our former Commissioner Northern would understand how things were not operating well under his term as Commissioner Northern. We monitor, not only their financial performance, but the broader economic and social value that they create through employment, infrastructure, service delivery, and national development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been going through several reports with some as old as eight years old, and these committees were running around Fiji reading an eight-year report, how do you run a balance sheet of a company? Are you checking all those eight-year balance sheets? As a commercial company, as a manager and man, you should read the report every year, immediately. I will tell you that that was the downfall of FijiFirst. An eight-year report never came out, and you are now touring around the whole country, reading a report of eight years old. My God!

Our objective is very clear - to transform public enterprises into high-performing and financially sustainable organisations that deliver stronger returns, better services and lasting value for the people of Fiji because that is what they deserve.

Do not drink your water! What is the matter, honourable Usamate? Are you drying up?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the past year, we have advanced a comprehensive programme of governance reform. With 16 years, you had wasted your time!

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Hear, hear!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Who said "hear, hear"?

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- The Coalition Government re-established the Higher Salaries Commission and this august House approved amendments to Schedule 1 of the Higher Salaries Commission Act 2023, extending the Commission's oversight to eight additional public entities. This important reform has strengthened transparency, accountability and consistency across the public enterprise sector.

To further strengthen the governance, the Ministry is designing a Board Performance Framework that will introduce clearer performance expectations, strengthen accountability and reinforce the principles of good corporate governance across all public enterprises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has also worked closely with the Board to remove longstanding barriers that have constrained investment, expansion and innovation. From resolving strategic land issues at Post Fiji Limited, advancing renewable energy initiatives at PAFCO, supporting product diversification at Unit Trust of Fiji (Management) Limited, to progressing the Fiji Coconut Millers' coir project, our focus has been on unlocking growth opportunities and creating new revenue streams.

Equally important, we have broken down institutional silos. For too long, many public enterprises operated independently, despite serving the same industries and national priorities. Today, we are fostering greater collaboration, encouraging resource sharing and creating strategic partnerships in our portfolio.

The recent fuel supply challenges provided a clear example of this collaborative approach in action. The Ministry brought together public enterprises and key stakeholders from the aviation, tourism and transport sectors, to openly discuss the challenges affecting their respective operations and to coordinate practical solutions. Even major operators, such as Fiji Airways and Fiji Airports, acknowledged that it was the first time (under my Ministry and as a Minister) we have brought everyone together under one roof. I must thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation who facilitated this programme. No one wanted to see eye-to-eye, we facilitated it, and I must thank the honourable Prime Minister for facilitating that as well.

Building on this momentum, the Ministry is establishing a dedicated performance oversight framework, to provide focused support to underperforming entities, accelerate reform and improve operational performance. These initiatives are complemented by investments in digital transformation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have seven more minutes, so I would now like to emphasise on what the honourable Prime Minister has done and help move forward public enterprises. He has initiated a project which is the shipbuilding in this country. The Australian Government has given budget support, and I must thank the honourable Prime Minister because he has done something in the Western Division where we will have the shipbuilding yard. The Australian Government has come in to make things happen. We will not only have a shipbuilding yard for our country, but it will be something for the entire South Pacific. Honourable Prime Minister, Sir, thank you very much for what you have done. No one could even see all that.

(Honourable Member interjected)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Hey, say it loudly! If you have to say something, say it loudly, otherwise do not speak. Come on, I have two other portfolios to talk about. If Mr. Speaker will give me some more minutes, otherwise, I will finish this in five minutes or six minutes. My brain cells always say, "okay", so I will continue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have a written speech with me, and I have a lot of things to say. I have spoken on public enterprises, so we are moving forward. I am trying to combine these because there are so many entities - Fiji Rice, Copra Millers, whereby we are trying to rationalise and bring them all together under one roof so that we ensure we do not spend money in duplicity. That is called business planning.

On Multi-Ethnic Affairs, this was disbanded by the Bainimarama and FijiFirst Government. We had Multi-Ethnic Affairs under the Qarase-led Government. I must thank the honourable Prime Minister for reintroducing the Multi-Ethnic Affairs in this country. We are now giving services to all the minority groups in this country. We are giving money and funding to all the projects, including to iTaukei. It was a shame on the last government for disbanding that.

(Honourable Member interjected)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Listen! I will tell you one thing - in the history of this country, you will be remembered the last.

(Laughter)

I am saying this because you were supposed to be the custodian of the minorities, yet you only served yourselves.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were given almost \$3.5 million in budgetary allocation in the last three years. In this Budget, we may be given another \$2 million plus but I will tell you that this small amount goes a long way.

I now turn to Culture and Arts. I have been given the privilege to be the Minister responsible for Culture and Arts. We have a cultural heritage as well. We have been given a budget to improve the Levuka Heritage site, and we have been negotiating with the World Heritage Organization as well. Levuka and other heritage premises will all be improved and given full funding.

To all honourable Members, including Members of the Opposition, please, do not try to criticise this Budget just because it is an election year. No one is going to hear you. I have gone to Levuka, Labasa, Taveuni and everywhere, people tell me, "Please, tell them do not stand". So, Opposition Members, do not waste your time. I challenge you - half of you will not return to Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- You may wonder why I keep repeating the portfolios of the Ministers, it is because I have witnessed school children and adults sitting, arguing and trying to find out what Minister is responsible for whom. That is my contribution to public education when I often repeat your portfolios. Also, to figure out the full responsibilities of the Ministers, for the general public. I do not know whether they have been interested in this evening's proceedings but that is another matter, but I thank you, honourable Minister, for your contribution.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of Opposition, honourable Ministers and honourable Assistant Ministers, and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise today in full support of the 2026-2027 National Budget. I congratulate the honourable Minister of Finance, as well as his team, for delivering a Budget that is responsible, practical and focused on ordinary Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, this Budget understands what families are going through. The cost of living is still a challenge. Around the world, uncertainty continues, yet this Budget protects the vulnerable, invests in essential services, creates opportunities, growth, and keeps Fiji moving forward.

Today, Mr. Speaker, I will speak on the work of two very separate and distinct Ministries - the Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change. They are very different, but they have one thing in common - one protects the truth and the other protects our future. Both are about protecting the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, today information travels faster than ever before. We even saw honourable Charan Jeet Singh hold up the newspaper using it in Parliament today of today's headlines.

Mr. Speaker, stories can spread across the country in minutes. Of course, false information can create fear, division and confusion. That is why the Government has a responsibility to

communicate clearly, honestly and quickly. Whether it is cyclone warnings or any other kind of disasters or floods that threaten our communities or whether it is a health emergency or when Fiji was faced with the recent global fuel crisis, people needed facts, not rumours, so good communication helps people to make good decisions, helps alleviate fear and confusion and sometimes it even saves lives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government is also using technology to better serve our people. Today, more than half a million people follow Government's official digital platforms. Instead of waiting for tomorrow's newspaper, people can now receive official information immediately on their phones. That means we can quickly correct misinformation and make sure people receive accurate updates because communication is not just about being first, it is about being trusted.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, earlier this year, we launched the SAUTU Counter-Disinformation Framework. It is not about censoring people, it is not about restricting free speech, it is about helping Fijians to recognise false information, think critically and make informed decisions. We believe the best way to fight misinformation is with better information. That is why today and tomorrow, Mr. Speaker, Sir, communications officers from across Government are receiving specialised training, going into a deep dive of the SAUTU Disinformation Framework, as well as the Communications Guidebook.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our government is committed to media freedom. Fiji continues to improve its international standing because journalists are able to work independently and professionally. With the Public Service Broadcasting Programme, Government works with media organisations to ensure important public information reaches every Fijian, including those living in rural and maritime communities.

This is not about funding these media organisations. In my response to honourable Ketan Lal, this is about using the online reach of our media organisations because now, that news has largely moved across platforms from print to online platforms. We work with our media organisations, mainstream media, in order to reach our people through the Public Service Broadcasting Grant. Of course, they still have their own commercial operations, which they fund themselves, but we work with them on public service broadcasting community messages because Government cannot do it alone. We have to work with our media partners in order to reach our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year, Fiji hosted its first ever Government Communications Conference and the message was simple. Good policies only work if people understand them. Government communication is not about the publicity, it is about helping people understand Government services, access assistance and know their rights.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also acknowledge the work of the National Archives of Fiji. Archives are much more than old documents stored on shelves. They protect our history and preserve our identity. This year, the National Archives digitised more than 60,000 pages of Indian Indenture records, making them easier for families, researchers, and future generations to access. As we build the Fiji of tomorrow, we must protect the Fiji of yesterday. We must protect our history because a country that remembers its history is better prepared for its future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will now move to the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change. Looking after environment is not just about protecting reefs or protecting rivers or the sea - it is about protecting our health, our homes, our jobs and our children's future. We all know climate change is here. Communities are seeing stronger storms. Coastlines are disappearing. Flooding is becoming more common. Farmers are facing changing weather. Fishermen and fisherwomen are seeing

changes in our oceans. These are real challenges affecting real people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government is moving from promises or plans and delivering practical action. We have strengthened our environmental laws. We have updated the Environmental Management Act and the Litter Act. We are implementing the Climate Change Act to make sure Government works together to prepare Fiji for the future. We have improved our environmental monitoring and strengthened enforcement so development can continue while protecting our environment.

Mr. Speaker, we are also bringing investment into Fiji. We have secured funding for major projects that will restore forests, protect our coastlines and strengthen communities against climate change. Earlier this month, for example, Fiji has secured \$117 million of Green Climate Fund project to restore our forests, protect water sources, improve biodiversity and support livelihoods, as you have heard from the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forests. That is one of the largest climate investments ever approved for Fiji. Every dollar we secure from overseas partners is one less dollar our taxpayers have to find. It is an investment that benefits our people.

Mr. Speaker, waste management remains one of our biggest challenges. We continue to hear from our people, we continue to hear from our tourists, and we continue to hear from all communities that there is just too much rubbish out there - on the streets, along the pathways, along our highways, in the communities.

This Budget continues to invest in our Naboro Landfill so Municipalities can continue collecting and safely disposing of waste. Of course, Mr. Speaker, we still have a challenge of collecting rubbish from our informal and squatter settlements, as well as our villages.

There is still no national solution to that, Mr. Speaker, that is why we have our National Waste Management Strategy that will be brought to Cabinet and funded, and we will be assisted by our development partners to come up with this national solution.

Mr. Speaker, better infrastructure alone is not enough. Our people need to take responsibility, so I speak to the people of Fiji, “Anyone listening or watching this - *sa rauta na benu ca.*” Keep asking for rubbish bins but you are not disposing of your rubbish properly.

They complain about flooding in our towns and settlements and in the cities. That is because of throwing rubbish in the drains. We see our people in FRA and WAF clearing out the drains. It is just full of rubbish, Mr. Speaker. So, please, stop throwing rubbish and stop littering. Government cannot pick up your rubbish for you, or all those communities that are doing good clean-up campaigns.

You should not even have to get there. Please, dispose of your rubbish properly. The fines for littering have increased and for the first time, companies that illegally dump, even within their own yards, face penalties. If you want to make money by polluting Fiji, then expect to answer before the law.

Mr. Speaker, Government is also supporting practical programmes that involve communities. Our trash boom projects are stopping rubbish before it reaches our rivers and oceans. Trash bins are being installed in choke points and in places where there are many communities that live upstream in settlements. They collect so much rubbish every week, Mr. Speaker, every day. Again, they are throwing rubbish in the rivers, which end up in the sea.

Of course, our community cleanups are bringing people together. I acknowledge the many

Fijians who continue to come together to clean up because they care for a beautiful, clean Fiji. Indeed, cleanliness is next to Godliness. I acknowledge the Nasinu Women's Forum, Nakasi Rugby and Netball Association, Tailevu North Rugby and Netball Clubs, Vanuakula Village in Naitasiri, Nasese Residence, Suva South District Pathfinders of the Seventh-Day Advantage Church, Vuda Youth Rugby Club, et cetera. I acknowledge and thank the Fiji Navy, who, to kick-start their 51st anniversary celebration this Thursday, will do so with a cleanup from Bowling Club to My Suva Park.

Mr. Speaker, our new school waste management project, partnering with our Municipal Councils, is teaching children how to separate rubbish properly. We have delivered separation bins to Suva Grammar School, Ratu Sukuna Memorial School, Labasa College in the North and Natabua High School in the West, with more to come with budgetary allocations.

Through the Return and Earn Initiative, we have partnered with our bottling companies where people can return their bottles and cans for 5 cents each, instead of throwing them away. So, that is gaining momentum, Mr. Speaker, that the Return and Earn Initiative have to find warehouse space to store all of what they are collecting.

Mr. Speaker, protecting the environment is not just our responsibility as Government, Opposition or Parliament, it is for everyone.

Mr. Speaker, we are also helping communities prepare to counter the effects of climate change. We continue to implement the Climate Change Act, supporting vulnerable communities, improving climate reporting, and helping families whose homes are no longer safe because of rising seas and other climate impacts to relocate.

Relocation is the last resort in any climate effects. It really is, because it displaces people. We have families or communities in Macuata, in Narata, and also in Vuniniudrovu, who had to relocate, Sir, and it is very sad for them to be able to leave where they have lived for generations, to move somewhere else as they are displaced. It is a very tough decision for a community to make, but we stand in support of them. It is about protecting their lives, and it is about giving their families hope.

Mr. Speaker, Fiji continues to be respected internationally for its climate leadership. As the Chair of the Pacific Small Island Developing States, Fiji continues to speak up for the Pacific on climate finance, climate justice and stronger global action. Later this year, as we all know, we will be hosting the pre-COP with Australia and Tuvalu and our Pacific neighbours, and we are also building partnerships in accessing new technology and making sure that our Pacific voice is heard.

Of course, as we prepare for COP31, we are grateful for the partnership. The honourable Leader of the Opposition as the Pacific Envoy on Oceans. We will be working together, Mr. Speaker, on taking Fiji's voice a bipartisan and ensuring that bipartisanship and ensuring the whole of Parliament is represented on that forum, because it affects all of us- the effects of climate change, so this is important to have this partnership.

Mr. Speaker, our forests, our rivers, our reefs and oceans are not just beautiful for the tourists, they also provide us with food, they create jobs, they attract tourists, they support our farmers and our fisher-people. We need to protect nature; we need to protect our environment and the livelihoods of thousands of Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, there is an old saying, "The best time to fix a roof is before the rain comes". This is true for our environment. It is cheaper now to prevent damage rather than repairing it later.

Mr. Speaker, I want to reiterate the words of honourable Vakalalabure. Indeed, we cannot control what continues to happen around us or globally, whether it is in the Middle East, in Russia, in the Ukraine, or other parts of the world that are facing wars or calamities. We cannot even control the terms of the deal regarding the Strait of Hormuz, because it keeps changing - one week it is open, the next week it is closed, et cetera. We cannot either control the increase in fuel prices and how it has led to an increase in the cost of living to increase the prices of imported goods, food and services.

Mr. Speaker, when the war broke out around the end of February 2026, the Strait of Hormuz was closed in late March 2026, but the Government did not wait. We did not wait, we acted. Government activated the Emergency Fuel Response Plan, convened the Fuel Advisory Committee and we worked with Cabinet to keep our people well-informed. Then in April, we addressed the nation directly, helping our people by alleviating fear and uncertainty.

Of course, our fuel relief package was effective from May 2026 with redeployment and cuts from Ministries. I hope our Members in the Opposition remember that. There was redeployment of funds where there were certain things in our Ministries that we could not achieve in the financial year. There was redeployment and the assistance from the Australian Government as well went in there, honourable Ketan Lal, and this was to pay and fund for the bus fare increases.

Also, in June, the Government paid for the surcharge by EFL to buffer the electricity charges. So, this just did not go into the main budget, as has been alluded by honourable Ketan Lal. It is actually used for our people in terms of the measures we needed to be able to deal with the global fuel crisis and what our people are facing. The Australians came later, but the Government had already moved on it in a redeployment package.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to close, when future generations will look back at this Parliament, I hope they will not only remember the budgets we passed. I hope they will remember the country we built, all of us together - a Fiji where people have access to truthful information; a Fiji with cleaner rivers and healthier forests; a Fiji that protects its oceans; a Fiji that is prepared for climate change and a Fiji where every child has the opportunity to succeed. This Budget helps build that Fiji. I fully support this Budget.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, fellow Members of Parliament, my fellow Fijians, a very good evening to you all. I rise to support the 2026-2027 National Budget, the fourth and the final budget of the Coalition Government.

As the Minister for Defence and Veteran Affairs, I do so conscious that the first duty of the State is to protect its people. Yet, defence cannot be reduced to uniforms, vessels, bases, weapons, or expenditure. These are instruments of defence, but they are not its purpose. The purpose of defence is to preserve a sovereign nation in which our people can live safely, freely, and with dignity under institutions that are lawful, democratic, and worthy of public trust. We defend our territory because it is the home of our people. We defend our constitutional order because public power must remain answerable to the citizens.

The most important achievements of this Government in defence and national security are, therefore, not found only in equipment acquired, facilities constructed, or agreements concluded. They are found in the work we have begun to return defence to its proper place with a constitutional democracy. During this term, we have affirmed that the discipline forces exist to serve the people, that military authority must remain subject to lawful civilian control, and that national security cannot be separated from democracy, accountability, human rights and the rule of law.

Our history has shown what happens when institutions entrusted with defending the nation move beyond the lawful responsibilities. The Military intervention in politics weakens democratic institutions, damage economic confidence, divide communities and diminish trust in the discipline forces. This Government chose not to conceal that history or soften its lessons. We chose to confront it, because no institution becomes stronger by refusing to examine the moments when it failed the country.

The honour of military service is not found in governing the people. It is found in serving them with discipline, courage and restraint. A professional military does not decide who should govern. It protects the constitutional system through which the people make decisions. Obedience to the law does not weaken a soldier. It gives legitimacy to the authority placed in the soldier's hands and preserves the honour of the institution in which the soldier serves.

The rule of law is one of the foundations of national security. Without law, host becomes arbitrary. Without accountability, authority becomes privilege. Without civilian oversight, institutions created to protect the nation may begin to believe that they stand above it. Accountability is not hostility towards the disciplining forces. It protects the integrity and preserves the trust upon which legitimate authority depends. The strongest security institution is not the one most feared by the population, rather it is the one most trusted by the people.

One of the major achievements of the Government was the completion of the National Security and Defence Review. The review examined Fiji's security environment honestly and identified weaknesses in co-ordination, gaps in capability, and declining confidence in public institutions. It also confronted the threats posed by illicit narcotics, transnational crimes, cyber insecurity, climate change, economic vulnerability, and social division. From that work, we developed and adopted the National Security Strategy 2025-2029.

Fiji now has a comprehensive framework that explains what national security means, what threats we face, and what reforms must follow. The strategy places the safety and well-being of the citizens at the centre of security policy. It recognises that national security is not the private domain of the military nor the police or the intelligence community. It includes the defence of sovereignty, the resilience of our economy, the integrity of democracy, the protection of our environment, social cohesion, and confidence in public institutions. This marks an important change in the way Fiji thinks about security.

For too long, security was sometimes treated as the protection of the state from criticism or political disagreement. Our approach has been that the state becomes stronger when citizens are free to participate, institutions are accountable, and when political change can occur without violence. Democracy is not an obstacle to national security, rather it is one of its deepest foundations. Challenges may be produced through fear, however, challenge is not stability. Lasting stability is created when people accept the legitimacy of institutions because those institutions act lawfully and fairly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government has itself demonstrated these principles. When this government was formed, many predicted that a coalition of different parties could not provide stable leadership. Yet this Government has endured because consultation, compromise, and democratic maturity can produce stability without coercion.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Political differences have been managed within cabinet, parliament, and the institutions of democracy rather than outside them. This whole budget is evidence

that a democratic government, even when difficult and imperfect, can endure.

Another achievement has been the strengthening of civilian leadership and coordination within the national security system. The threats confronting Fiji do not fit neatly within the boundaries of individual agencies. Drugs move through our waters, ports, airports, financial systems, and communities. Several attacks may affect government, businesses and essential services at the same time.

Climate disasters demand cooperation between civilian authorities, the military, communities, and international partners. We have therefore worked to strengthen the national security council system, the senior officials committee on national security and the civilian structures that provide advice, coordination, and oversight.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, national security decisions must be based on evidence, professional assessment and the lawful direction of the elected Government. At the same time, coordination must not erase institutional boundaries. The Fiji Police Force remains the primary law enforcement institution. The Republic of Fiji Military Forces may provide specialist support when lawfully authorised and genuinely necessary however, it must not become a substitute for civilian policy.

The distinction between police and military responsibilities is a safeguard for democracy, for the public, and for the disciplined forces themselves. We have also begun a serious programme of security sector reform. This includes reviewing the laws and policies governing the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, advancing the maritime security strategy, developing Fiji's first national peacekeeping strategy, strengthening our search and rescue framework, preparing a defence cybersecurity strategy, and improving the Ministry's capacity for policy oversight, intelligence assessment, international engagement, and civilian oversight.

These reforms may attract less public attention than a new vessel or facility, but lasting security depends upon sound laws, clear mandates, professional education, and accountable institutions, Mr. Speaker. The RFMF has undertaken internal reforms to improve organisations' logistics and accountability. The establishment of the Joint Logistics Command, and the implementation of the Automated Logistics Management System are intended to improve inventory control, efficiency, and readiness.

A military institution is not made effective by appearance alone, Mr. Speaker. Its true strength is found in the system that ensures personnel are trained, supplied, supported, and ready when the nation requires them. Organisation must therefore be measured not only by what is purchased, but by whether the institution becomes more disciplined, sustainable, and capable of fulfilling its lawful responsibilities. We have also strengthened Fiji's response to transnational organised crime and illicit narcotics. The drug crisis is not merely a policing issue. It affects families, schools, workplaces, health services, economic productivity, and the integrity of public institutions.

Our response must bring together the lawful capabilities of the police, the RFMF, Customs, Immigration, Fisheries, and other authorities, while preserving the police as a primary law enforcement institution. We have strengthened the Maritime Essential Services Centre, improved interagency coordination, and developed a clearer understanding of activity within Fiji's maritime domain.

Fiji's Exclusive Economic Zone covers approximately 1.3 million square kilometres. Across that vast area, the Navy supports surveillance, search and rescue, hydrographic services, and the safety of mariners. The ocean connects our islands, carries our trade, and sustains community. But it is also this place through which drugs, illegal fishing, human trafficking, and other forms of trans-

national crime they reach us. For a small island State with limited assets, reliable intelligence, information sharing and coordination are as important as the number of vessels that we possess.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's contribution to its international peacekeeping remains one of the proudest expressions of our national service. For more than four decades, Fijian personnel have served in some of the world's most difficult environments. They have protected civilians, supported humanitarian operations and stood between communities divided by violence. Their service has earned Fiji respect far beyond might be expected of a nation of our size.

Peacekeeping has also taught us something profound about peace itself. Force may not stop immediate violence, but force alone cannot create a peaceful society. This depends upon legitimacy, justice, dialogue and institution that communities can trust. The values our peacekeepers defend abroad must also guide our institutions at home. We cannot speak proudly of defending peace overseas, while neglecting democracy within Fiji. Nor insist upon the rule of law abroad while treating it as optional here. The development of Fiji's first National Peacekeeping Strategy is, therefore, not only about future deployments, but it is also about ensuring that our international service remains professional, principled and aligned with the welfare of the personnel and the families who carry the burden of that service.

We have also strengthened our international defence relationships, while maintaining an independent view of Fiji's national interest. In a region increasingly affected by strategic competition, Fiji must remain open to constructive partnerships without allowing itself to become an instrument of division between larger powers. Our interest is best served by a Pacific in which dialogue remains open, sovereignty is respected and cooperation contributes to a genuine ocean of peace.

Another important achievement has been, Mr. Speaker, the advancement of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. We have placed the meaningful participation of women within Fiji's National Security Framework and undertaken detailed assessments of the barriers women face within the RFMF and the Fiji Police Force. This work recognises that the experience of conflict, crime, disaster and insecurity are not the same for everyone and that policies developed without the participation of women will inevitably overlook important dimensions of community safety and institutional effectiveness.

Women Peace and Security is not an exercise in symbolism, nor it is simply about increasing numbers. It is about ensuring that women participate meaningfully in recruitment, training, deployment, operational planning, peacekeeping and the senior decision-making. It is also about building institutions in which women can serve safely, progress on merit and contribute fully to the defence of the nation. A security institution cannot fully understand the population it protects while excluding the experience, judgment and leadership of half of their population. The assessments undertaken through the measuring opportunities for Women Peace Operations Programme have given us an evidence-based foundation for reform. The next stage is implementation.

We must address institutional barriers, improve facilities and policies, strengthen professional development and ensure that women are not merely present in our security institutions but are able to influence their direction. A more inclusive security sector is not only fairer, it is more capable, more representative and better able to earn the trust of the communities that it serves.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our achievement must also be judged by how we treat those whose active service has ended. Through the Veterans Service Division, the Ministry has continued oversight of the Fiji Servicemen Aftercare Fund, the Welfare of former Servicemen, Honours and Awards, the National War Memorial and Fijis Overseas War Grades.

We have also begun reviewing the arrangements governing veteran support. A nation's debt to a veteran cannot be discharged through a medal, a ceremony or a speech. Some return from service with miserable injuries others carry burdens that are less easily seen. Their families also bear the cost of absence, uncertainty and sacrifice. The value of service does not end when the uniform is removed. This state must remain questioned when those who served required assistance, dignity and care.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the allocation in this Budget will allow the Ministry and the Republic of Fiji Military Forces to continue this work but I do not intend to reduce this address to resettle the figures. Budgets provide the means by which institutions operate but money does not provide their purpose. The purpose comes from the principles by which institutions are led and the standards by which they are held accountable.

As this is the fourth and final budget of the Coalition Government, we should be honest about what has been achieved and what remains unfinished. We completed the National Security and Defence Review. We adopted the National Security Strategy. We strengthened civilian national security, leadership and inter-agency coordination. We began important legal and policy reforms. We advanced maritime security, peacekeeping, international defence engagements, women peace and security and the welfare of veterans. We improved the RFMS's internal logistics and supported a more coordinated response to narcotics and transnational crime. Most importantly, we placed democracy, accountability, human rights, and the rule of law at the center of National Security Policy. Institutional reform cannot be completed in a single term of Parliament, Mr. Speaker.

Trust damaged over many years cannot be restored through one strategy, one Minister, or one government. Trust is restored through conduct. It is restored each time an institution remains within the law when it might have exceeded it, when wrongdoing is investigated rather than concealed, and when leaders accept that public authority carries an obligation to answer for its use. Perhaps, the most important achievement of this Government has been to change the question Fiji asks about national security. The question can no longer be simply how much power the Government possesses. The better question to ask is why that power is exercised under whose authority it is exercised and to whom those who exercise it are accountable.

The lasting defense of Fiji will not be secured by the strength of one leader, one Government, or one Military Commander. It will be secured by institutions that remain lawful when leaders change, by disciplined forces that understand both their powers and their limits, and by citizens who trust that the State exists to protect them rather than dominate them. Our duty is to defend Fiji not only as a territory but as a democracy. We must protect our borders, our waters, our communities, and our people from crime, disaster, and external threats. We must protect the constitutional principles that ensure the instruments of security never again become instruments of insecurity. That is the deeper meaning of defense, and it is the work of this Government that has just begun and is the work that Fiji must continue.

For our serving men and women, for our peacekeepers, for the women helping reshape security institutions, for our veterans and their families, and for every Fijian whose freedom and security depend upon strong, lawful, and accountable institutions, I support the 2026-2027 National Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend this Budget to Parliament.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, and to our fellow Fijians who are joining us through the Parliament channel and other

electronic platforms, I extend my very warm greetings to you, *ni sa bula vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I proceed, I wish to place on record my sincere appreciation to the honourable Minister of Finance, the Permanent Secretary for Finance, the Head of the Budget Division, and the entire Budget Team within the Ministry of Finance. The preparation of the National Budget is one of the most demanding exercises undertaken by Government each year. It requires months of consultations, rigorous analysis, careful fiscal planning, and close collaborations across the Ministries and stakeholders. Their professionalism, dedication, and commitment have resulted in a budget that balances fiscal responsibility with our national development priorities. On behalf of the Office of the Prime Minister, I thank them for their exemplary service to the people of Fiji.

At the outset, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to respond to some of the contributions that have been made by the Opposition. The first one was when they were saying that the Opposition has suggested that international confidence in Fiji will be eroded. The Opposition Members have suggested that Fiji may face increasing reluctance from international financing institutions to provide development financing should our public debt continue to rise.

While such concerns deserve consideration, they should also be reviewed within the broader context of how international development partners actually assess countries. Institutions such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank and other bilateral development partners do not make lending decisions solely on the size of the country's debt. They assess the government's institutional strength, fiscal management, debt sustainability, economic growth prospects, policy credibility, and the country's demonstrated ability to honor its financial commitments.

Fiji continues to enjoy strong partnerships with these institutions because they have every confidence in our reform agenda. They have every confidence in our institutions and confidence in our long-term development strategy. Their continued support is not an act of charity. It is an acknowledgement that Fiji remains a credible and responsible development partner committed to using concessional financing to improve infrastructure and to strengthen resilience and expand economic opportunities.

The second issue that was brought up by some of the members of the opposition is economic diversification. On this point, I believe that this is a very important issue. What distinguishes this government is that diversification is no longer viewed as an aspiration or a policy slogan. It is being translated into practical programmes that create jobs, strengthen rural livelihoods, and open new opportunities. Yesterday, we heard from honourable Kamikamica the list of programmes that we have tried to implement. Rather than just seeing them on paper, we are seeing them on the ground.

We invest in agriculture, fisheries, manufacturing, tourism, renewable energy, blue economy, value-adding, processing, micro, small, and medium enterprises. We recognize that a resilient economy is one that creates opportunities across multiple sectors rather than relying on a single industry. Diversification is also about empowering communities to utilize their own resources more productively. It is about transforming underutilized land into productive assets, strengthen the value chains, encouraging entrepreneurship, and connecting rural producers to domestic and international trade.

As I have said a number of times in this House, Mr. Speaker, this example of planting cowpea, that has been also shared by honourable Niudamu, on how we have started this industry. In 2025, in January, I joined a number of farmers from Burenitu, and of course, with the help of Indo-Fijian Cooperative New Valley, where we started this industry. And currently, we have approximately 500 farmers that are involved in cowpea production in Ra, of course, in Ba, Sigatoka area.

There is genuine willingness for farmers when they see that the government is coming down to them and telling them this is another alternative. If you plant one acre of cowpea, that is roughly \$10,000. If you plant cane in one acre, that is \$3,500. So, farmers in the cane fields in Ba will tell you that we are coming to them and sharing with them the story of diversification. This year, we are targeting that the harvest will be about 1,000 tonnes, so within the next two weeks, the harvest will come from these farmers. I would like to thank the Indian Embassy. They have provided us with the seeds, the New Valley Cooperative, North Sabeto, they are there helping out the farmers. I would like to thank the manager, Mr. Abhinesh Rai, and of course, Mr. Akhtar Ali, who have been very supportive of this initiative.

The other issue that I wish to raise is the dugar industry. As most of you are aware, when the Select Committee of Parliament was in the West, we faced a lot of questions from the farmers. What is the future of the industry? What are we going to do? I would like to thank the Permanent Secretary of Finance in yesterday's Fiji Times, Mr. Shri Gounder said that we need to be looking at this industry much more carefully. He received quite a lot of opposition. But I wish to say that if Mr. Shri Gounder had raised this issue 10 years ago, he would have reached 55 today, because we are providing that platform for people to speak very openly. That is what this Government is all about. It is about governance. It is about freedom for everyone to speak and say their mind. We will not sack you, so that is what we have told the civil servants. You can say what you want to see about the Government. But we will not prosecute you or turn you to be 55 immediately.

For the last 10 years, there has been very little attempt by the previous government to improve the Sugar industry. We hope that the Sugar Select Committee will be coming up with new strategies to ensure that the industry will survive for the next 50 years. The Blue and Green Economy, this morning, honourable Ketan Lal was talking about the lack of Government attempt not to go out into the rural areas. In his town of Savusavu, we will be launching a program next week that targets his village, his tikina, of Savusavu, Wailevu, Navatu, Koroalau, and Vaturova in empowering farmers and ensuring that they adopt climate smart agriculture practices.

Also, this project is looking at strengthening agriculture value chain and improving food security at the village level. The honourable Prime Minister will be launching this \$10 million project at Koronatoga Village at Navatu on Friday next week. This Government is going out into the community. They want to create enterprises in the communities and villages. In the next 10 years, we will be able to cover the whole of Vanua Levu and we will be extending this project to Viti Levu and other outer islands. There are so many challenges within communities and villages, this project will be able to change the mindset of our communities, particularly in the rural areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me now to turn to the role of the Office of the Prime Minister. The Office of the Prime Minister occupies a unique position within the machinery of Government. It is more than an administrative office. It is the strategic centre of Government and ensures national priorities are translated into coordinated actions across Ministries and agencies. One of the Government's greatest responsibilities is ensuring that the national development reaches every village, every settlement, and every community throughout Fiji. The Development Grant Programme administered through the Office of the Prime Minister, reflects this commitment, and I salute the Budget team for recognising the impact of the development grant by increasing the allocation from \$1.4 million in the 2025-2026 Budget to \$2.5 million in the 2026-2027 National Budget.

Through the targeted development initiatives, the development fund framework and community-focused interventions, the Government continues to provide support to our communities. Since January 2023, the Office of the Prime Minister, through the Small Grants Scheme and development grants, has funded 176 projects with a total value of \$5.45 million throughout Fiji. This comprises 74 infrastructure projects valued at \$3.24 million, 64 social services projects valued at

\$1.49 million, and 38 economic service projects valued at \$718,000.

During the period January to July 2023, the Government funded 3 projects valued at \$553,000. These included:

- Solar installations in Lomaiviti, Vatulele, Tailevu;
- School dining hall in Udu Point;
- Upgrading works in Vunidawa;
- Wi-Fi connectivity in Vanua Levu;
- Resource Centre development in Bau; and
- Boat and engine assistance for communities in Vuna. Moala and Bau.

In 2023-2024, Government funded 37 projects valued at \$1.7 million that includes:

- Construction of a dispensary in Ovalau;
- Evacuation centres in Kia and Nabaitavo;
- Construction of a school hall in Rakiraki;
- Road access projects in Levuka, Saqai, and Kiuva;
- School upgrades in Vunidawa and Koroinasolo; and
- Boat and engine assistance for Totoya and Kabara.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the programme reached its highest level of implementation in 2025, with 57 projects valued at \$2 million. The key projects include:

- Completion of a multi-purpose shed for school in Nasinu;
- School renovations and ablution facilities at Naboro, Nabua, Lomaivuna and Korovou;
- Road access and water projects in Lakeba, Korovuto, Viria, Namalata and Beqa;
- Community halls and evacuation centres in Vatoa, Korovuli, Vatulele and Nadala;
- Provision of an excavator to the Navuso Agricultural and Technical Institute; and
- Economic assistance of boats and engines for communities in Matuku, Kabara, Udu Point and Waidina.

In 2025-2026, the Government approved 49 projects with a budget of \$1.43 million. This included:

- School improvement projects in Vunoyasi, Burebasaga, Volivoli, Nasau, Delainavesi, Batibalavu and Nakadrau;
- Water projects in Veinuqa and Naitutu;
- Evacuation centres in Sinuvaca, Lovoni, Nawaikama, Lomai and Nakoronawa;
- Construction of a crematorium at Muaniweni Cemetery;
- Solar installations at Moturiki Health Centre;
- Road upgrades at Nadakuni; and
- Economic assistance of boats, engines, farming equipment and tourism support for communities in Vanua Levu, Beqa, Lau, Rakiraki and Sabeto.

The programme achieved broader national coverage with 84 projects valued at \$2.25 million in the Central Division; 82 projects valued at \$906,000 in the Eastern Division; 35 projects valued at \$1.05 million in the Northern Division; and 25 projects valued at \$1.24 million in the Western Division. The beneficiaries included communities, women's group, youth group, health facilities, sporting organisations and village development communities across Rewa, Tailevu, Naitasiri, Serua, Namosi, Lau, Lomaviti, Kadavu, Rotuma, Cakaudrove, Macuata, Bua, Ra Ba, Nadroga and Navosa.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these investments reflect the Government's commitment to delivering community-driven development through school infrastructure, evacuation centres, community halls, access roads, water and solar projects, health facilities, boats and engines, farming equipment and other economic empowerment initiatives that continue to improve livelihoods, strengthen resilience and enhance the wellbeing of communities throughout Fiji.

The Development Grant Programme remains an important vehicle through which Government delivers practical and meaningful assistance at the community level. The successful implementation of these projects demonstrates our commitment to supporting local development priorities, promoting community resilience and improving the livelihoods of people throughout Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these initiatives support communities by improving access to essential services, strengthening local infrastructure, enhancing economic participation and creating opportunities for sustainable development. They are not merely short-term interventions. They represent strategic investments in community resilience, local productivity and inclusive growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2026 – 2027 Budget appropriately strengthens the role of the Office of the Prime Minister, recognising that national development requires strong co-ordination between Government institutions and the communities that we serve. The office must continue to act as the bridge between national policy and community realities, ensuring that Government priorities are understood, implemented and experienced by ordinary Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those remarks, I reaffirm my full support for the 2026- 2027 National Budget.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and all those who are enjoying this session from the comfort of their homes, good evening, *bula, ram ram, namaste* and *as salamu alaykum* to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for Finance for taking the initial steps in trying to stabilise the economy, this budget offers no real economic solutions. Instead, it continues a cycle of handouts. I do not entirely blame the Minister as he inherited \$2 billion worth of public handouts and a debt increase of just over \$3 billion in the last three years. The rising cost of running our Government has pushed our nation to the brink, leaving our economy unsustainable and on the verge of collapse.

(Honourable Member interjected)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- This Government refuses to accept that this mess was not created by the Bainimarama or the FijiFirst Government, it is entirely their own doing, over the last three years.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- We longer have any remaining fiscal space because this administration is trying to run a modern economy using outdated policies from the 1980's and 1990's that no longer apply today.

(Honourable Members interjected)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- The Government is in chaos, the coalition agreement is in chaos,

the economy is chaos, our infrastructure is deteriorating, the bloated cabinet is in a mess, Fiji Airways, Fiji Sugar Industry, healthcare system, most public enterprises, law and order, education system and the fight against drug abuse and HIV, all of it is in absolute chaos.

(Honourable Members interjected)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Civil servants were given a three percent pay rise however, they have decreased two percent FNPF contribution this year. In actual fact, it is just one percent increase. They thought they were smart by having a two percent pay cut under the guise of a 2 percent employer contribution reduction.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- You are not making sense!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- It is a gross income going into the same pocket of an employee. Government is the employer, in order to reduce the expense, they have reduced the 2 percent contribution to the employer, though it was not going to his bank, but it was going in his FNPF contribution. I am coming to you, do not worry.

Let us start with Fiji Airways. Their airline is attempting to use fuel crisis to hide strategic blunders, particularly regarding the unprofitable flight routes. Poor commercial decisions have led to massive failures. The two new A350 aircraft should have been routed to Chicago rather than Dallas. A Chicago route would have provided superior connectivity to Europe. Furthermore, the next destination should have been Chennai in India, to lower the travel cost for the citizens seeking medical treatment and to provide a better access to the Asian region. This failure, yes, yes, definitely commercial decision. This failure is what happens when you appoint unsuccessful political candidates to board where they have absolutely no expertise. We need right people in the right position.

It is a laughable matter, Mr. Speaker, to have an individual with no business background sitting on the board that manages millions of dollars. Fiji Airways also blundered by deviating from its core business to enter the hotel industry. The airline's core business is to fly planes, not to enter into a joint venture with BSP to develop and run Sofitel Resort and move that civilly drain their cash flow. A \$495 million previous government guarantee loan would have not run out, if such pathetic decision had been avoided. Now the tourism industry is being forced to bail out Fiji Airways. Yes, have multiple and then ask another industry to pay for the blunder you have made. Despite having nothing to do with the

MR. SPEAKER.- One moment, one moment. I will not have this anymore, right? You do not interject directly to the person who is speaking.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Let me start again. The tourism industry is being forced to bail out Fiji Airways despite having nothing to do with the mismanagement and management failures. Imposing a 5 percent tax on hotel and resort is entirely wrong and should be reversed. This Government treats tourism industry like a goose that lays a golden egg every day, dividing it suddenly to lay two eggs when it is simply impossible. Stop hurting the successful industry to cover up the mistake of another entity.

Government must fix the blunders made by its own appointed directors. The administration is managing Fiji's economy exactly how National Bank of Fiji was managed back in 1990s, which ultimately led to the bank's collapse. If the Government continues on this path, they will collapse the entire Fijian economy. In the 90s, the Government mistakenly believed that NBF money belongs to them to spend as they please. Today, they are treating taxpayers' money the same exact way.

Although the Minister of Finance is trying hard to keep the economy afloat, he has no physical space left. While the revenue has increased, loan and government operating expenses are rising at an alarming rate. Every government makes mistakes, but the real question is whether we are willing to admit them. We can only correct our errors if we acknowledge them, which this Government refuses to do. Typical examples would include fuel crises, fuel subsidies, and the rising cost of goods, services, cartridges and fares.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask a simple question. When we could have actually stopped this fuel crisis affecting other industries in Fiji, if we would have just subsidised the three companies importing the fuel at source, rather than going out and giving subsidy here and there. If we would have reduced or subsidised the cost of the fuel coming into the country with these three fuel companies, the fuel cost at the service station would have not gone up. That would have actually happened, other things accumulated would not have taken place. The prices of goods, services, and cartridges would not have increased, but this Government actually thought that this crisis is just like another cyclone, which will be defined in one particular place and will not have the replicating effect. Unfortunately, they failed in that as well.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to quote a lesson from the Mahabharata - when Pitamah Bhishma lay on the bed of arrows, he reflected on his past sins. He was reminded by Lord Krishna, his sin was to remain silent during the humiliation of Draupadi in the royal court, her daughter-in-law. Silence in the face of wrongdoing is itself a sin. The reason I have quoted this, Mr. Speaker, I ask why Sanatan Sabha of Fiji has opted to remain silent on the matter of Tuatua Cemetery. Our Hindu rites are being suppressed, and not a single statement by Sanatan Sabha of Fiji, being the custodians of *Hindus* and *Hinduism* and its culture and practice.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, I think if you continue, I will send you out. I am telling you, that is the last warning. Do not disturb.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- I previously asked the honourable Prime Minister if his Minister was suppressing the religious rights by building the Tuatua Cemetery Crematorium, and I am still waiting for an answer to that. The furnace was built facing the wrong direction. For thousands of years, *Hindus* tradition dictates that the deceased person's head must point towards North or South not East or West.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a Government-funded project for the public.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the North Indians, the body faces towards North because the shift guns are placed in North. For the South Indian, it is pointing south because the Yama is in the South. We have been practising this for more than 4,000 years.

The issue does not arise. We have furnaces in Raralevu, Nakasi and Vatuwaqa. Because it faces North and South you can always interchange. If it is facing East and West and the opening is this much, how can you expect the body to go inside when the opening is just around two feet? It is a laughing matter for you. These are sacred final rites and a matter of fundamental respect for the deceased. It will not take much to realign the furnace, honourable Prime Minister.

I have evidence and witness showing that Minister threatened the *Hindu* institution, Vanua Levu Sanatan Sabha warning that if the community opposed the projects, they would lose their Government grants. Unlike Sanatan Sabha of Fiji the president of Vanua Levu Sanatan Sabha, Mr. Vinesh Ray raised this issue, and our religious leaders were humiliated by the minister sitting right here telling them that he is an idiot. When someone is trying to protect our right...

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Maharaj, what is the relevance of all of this? You are supposed to be discussing the Budget that was delivered by the Honourable Minister for Finance two weeks ago. How does this relate to it with all due respect.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- I will definitely explain that, Sir. It is a Government-funded project and I am definitely going to move a motion in the Committee of Supply so that we can realign the furnace because the religious leaders were raising concerns about this.

MR. SPEAKER.- What I am suggesting is that when you get through the Committee of Supply, and you do that but do not pre-empt it. This is the debate on the Budget. Can we keep it at the level of the Budget? We will come to the Committee of Supply, and you will be entitled to move your motion or amendment, whatever. Can you please continue along the line I am suggesting.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Sir, I will definitely adhere to that, and I look forward to the next 20 minutes when I give the motion to actually explain why I am moving that motion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me turn to the education sector. I have been very vocal about how education is funded. Right now, tertiary scholarships are being treated like a blank cheque for institutions. Some institutions are going door to door just to enrol students because Government scholarship is granted. The number of funded students has jumped from 15,000 to 23,000. While Fiji has a young population and we expect student numbers to grow, can we sustain this? I do not blame the tertiary institution; I blame the Government for handing out blank cheques. The more students an institution enrolls, the more revenue it collects. Naturally, they will take advantage of the system. Under previous administration, a student could negotiate flexible payment terms. Now the Government charges a harsh 50 percent penalty if a student wants to convert their bond into direct payment for migration purposes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, furthermore, I wonder how the Government suddenly realised that Pacific Polytech, which received millions over the last three years, no longer needs funding. Their budget has been drastically cut to \$500,000 despite reports that they requested over \$10 million. When I urged in the last budget debate that Pacific Polytech funding should be reduced, Government Members gave endless excuses. What has changed now? Are there no more students at Pacific Polytech, or does their education no longer matter to this particular Government? Perhaps the Minister of Finance finally realised I was right from day one when I called for accountability, given that we have still not received an audited financial report from this institution. What does Ganesh Chand, the Director, do, goes and files a defamation court case against me. How can asking for accountability be defamation? As Member of Parliament, we are constitutionally mandated to hold the Government accountable, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Now hang on, hang on. Let me explain the rules. If you are now saying that he has initiated a court action against you, then you cannot discuss a court action here. Let us keep it at that.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, all I am saying is we are constitutionally mandated to hold Government to account wherever the taxpayer money is used. That is all, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us look at the health sector. My first question concerns the Dreketi Health Centre. What happened to its allocation? I visited Dreketi recently, and nothing has been built. This year, they were only allocated \$370,000 compared to \$570,000 in the last budget. If they were not able to do anything with \$570,000, what are they going to do with the \$370,000?

Furthermore, everyone here agrees that Sai Prema Foundation is doing wonderful work by performing free heart surgeries for our children. They have completed over 470 successful surgeries, 52,000 free echocardiograms, and 80,000 medical consultations, yet the Government is reducing their budget. Knowing the poor state of our public health system and that heart surgery for kids is not available in Fiji, we should restore their funding to at least \$4 million so they can continue saving the lives of our children, Mr. Speaker, Sir, suffering from congenital heart disease.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also hearing the grand announcement about an Australian-backed hospital; I must ask what happened to the 100-bed super-speciality hospital promised by the Indian government four years ago. We should focus on fixing our existing broken health infrastructure instead of giving false hope to the public.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, medical interns are given two-and-a-half-year contracts and after completion they will not have a job, as no new positions have been created for medical officers, et cetera, in the hierarchy. While all civil servants are on permanent establishment, why do doctors remain on contract? Another failed promise. We were told that each and every civil servant would have an established position and they would retire at 55 years. I am requesting the honourable Member if you can look into this. Why are contracts still offered when the promise was made for medical interns?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, turning to infrastructure, electricity is not a luxury; it is an absolute necessity. It is unacceptable that when a technical fault occurs outside a standard business hour, citizens are left stranded. Everyday families are forced to wait an entire night or a full weekend in darkness before EFL deploys a maintenance crew. Unless and until you know someone in EFL, at CEO level, you give him the call, they attend, but if you do not, you will have to wait overnight.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Come on!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- This efficiency is compounded by primitive reconnection policy. If the household faces disconnection, EFL cuts the power immediately. However, once the consumer pays their bill, they are forced to wait up to three days just to get the power restored. How smart is EFL? They will say 24 working hours. In a day you only have 8 working hours. That accumulates to three days.

How can we justify forcing family or business or an elderly citizen to live in darkness for three days due to administrative delays in a modern digital economy? EFL holds a public monopoly, and with that privilege comes the duty of responsibility. Fijians pay for 24-7 utility, and they deserve 24-7 service.

Many households are still waiting for the grid extension just to light up their homes, as this Government has significantly reduced or removed the funding for the rural electrification programme.

Additionally, on infrastructure, roads connecting Labasa to Savusavu and Labasa to Nabouwalu are in a pathetic and neglected condition, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Just to see the condition of the junction in Labasa Town right in front of Macuata House, it has been neglected for months.

We must address this and fix our road. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must direct the attention of the House to a highly volatile and avoidable crisis unfolding in Labasa Town caused by an administrative blunder by Labasa Town Council. The Council unwisely allowed farmers to set up market stalls directly inside the main taxi stand. This has triggered operational chaos, putting our hardworking farmers against our equally hard-working taxi operators. The Labasa taxi stand was already heavily

congested, struggling to accommodate 185 legally permitted taxis that pay a base fee to operate there.

By placing market stalls in this exact space, the Council has suffocated a vital transport hub. Mr. Speaker, Sir, taxis now have nowhere to safely park or queue while the LTA and police aggressively fine legal operators for minor issues, illegal operators right in front of them face no penalty at all.

Officials simply turn a blind eye; this is not just the story of Labasa, but all over Fiji, whereby if a taxi operator is found parking on the parking meter, he is fined, but if a 'pari' is parked on the taxi base, they are not fined. The ultimate irony occurs on Saturday, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the busiest day of the week, the Labasa Town Council charges market vendors a stall fee to occupy the exact parking bay that taxi operators have already paid for via their taxi base fee.

The Council is double charging for the exact same space, collecting revenue from both sides while completely locking the taxi operators. No one denies that our farmers need a proper space to sell crops. They are the backbones of our rural economy, but solving the vendor space shortage by destroying a public transport terminal is short-sighted governance. Furthermore, these stalls are set up right over the drains. Imagine what these vendors endure during the rainy season. They deserve better, and we need to correct this as soon as possible, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

We have been promised a bypass road in Labasa for the past three years, yet there is still no budget allocated for it. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it seems the Government believes they can borrow without accountability, assuming lending agencies like ADB, IMF and World Bank will lend indefinitely. Very soon this institution will tell Fiji that we can no longer repay, and they will stop lending. What will happen then? This budget does not explain how Government plans to increase revenue, instead, economically, it sets a direct path of collapse.

Historically, there are three types of budgets. One is surplus budget, where revenue exceeds expenditure. Two is growth-orientated deficit budget, where you borrow money specifically to build long-term infrastructure. Three is a crisis budget, where you take out new loans just to pay off existing loans and to cover your operating costs. The Government has created such a mess over the last three years that they have delivered the largest deficit budget of our history, requiring a massive \$1.4 billion in new borrowing.

This will push our total national budget debt to around \$13.5 billion by the end of the new financial year, thus presenting a crisis budget. Finally, I must say this to the honourable Minister for Finance, that if you had been, one, guiding the budget for the past three years, we would have been in a much stronger position today, and you might have presented a budget that this side of the house would actually support today.

Since you have heard my plea over certain issues and reduced the misuse of the funds, I shall support these aspects of the budget in Committee of Supply. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR SPEAKER.- I thank you, honourable Maharaj, for your contribution. I must say that almost all of your contributions have no relevance to the Budget. You are talking about a lot of other issues that are raised on a normal parliamentary sitting, and the only relevant issue was that there was no budgetary allocation for it. I think we refer to it that way.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to this important debate and express my strong support for the 2026-2027 National Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I would describe the Budget with one word, and that word is pragmatic. Pragmatic because this Budget understands the reality of the times we are living in. Our people are concerned about the cost of living. They are concerned about jobs. They want better roads, a reliable public transport, they want better services and economic opportunities and Mr. Speaker, Sir, they rightly expect Government to respond.

Responsible leadership is not about promising everything to everyone. It is about making choices. It is about knowing what our people need today, while also preparing our country for tomorrow. That is what this Budget seeks to do. This Budget is more than a statement of revenue and expenditure. It is a financial roadmap for our nation, one that reflects our collective aspirations, responds to the realities we face today, and lays the foundation for a more secure and sustainable future. It is a budget that seeks to protect the vulnerable, strengthen our economy, invest in our people, and ensure that no Fijian is left behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are not living in ordinary times. Over the past decade, Fiji and the world have experienced a succession of unprecedented challenges. We endured the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought economies and societies to a standstill. Our nation has faced devastating natural disasters, including the destruction caused by the Category 5 *TC Winston*. At the same time, we continue to navigate an uncertain global environment shaped by military conflicts, geopolitical tensions, disruption to global supply chains, and an energy crisis that has affected the cost of living and doing business around the world. These global shocks do not remain beyond our shores. They affect the price of fuel at the pump. They affect the cost of food on supermarket shelves. They affect the cost of construction materials, transportation, and essential services. Ultimately, they affect the daily lives of ordinary Fijian families. Against this backdrop, the responsibility of Government is clear. To maintain economic stability, protect our people, support opportunity, and keep the nation moving forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget demonstrates that commitment. The allocation of \$647 million to the Ministry of Health and the Medical Services recognises a fundamental truth. The health of our people is the foundation of national development. I also commend the Government's continued investment in education. Education remains one of the most powerful investments any nation can make. When we educate a child, we do more than prepare the individual for employment. We strengthen families, communities and the future productive capacity of our country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the allocation of \$221 million towards social protection further demonstrates the inclusive nature of this Budget. Economic progress must be measured not only by growing figures and financial indicators, but also by how well we protect those who are most vulnerable and whether ordinary Fijians are able to participate in and benefit from national development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the most forward-looking initiatives in this Budget is the proposed establishment of a sovereign wealth fund. This represents an important shift in how we think about national wealth. A sovereign wealth fund is not only simply about managing money today, it is also about building and preserving the national wealth for tomorrow. It asks us to look beyond the immediate political and economic cycle and consider what assets and opportunities we will leave for our children and grandchildren.

I also commend the Government's intention to review the religious and moral enhancement initiatives and identify practical ways of strengthening values across our society. Economic development alone cannot solve every challenge confronting our nation. The Bible emphasises that nations, through security and salvation, cannot rely on economic power or military might alone. True strength is found in righteousness, justice, and dependence on God. We are seeing concerning growth

within our communities, including the spread of illicit drugs, increasing HIV infections, the erosion of values, and the weakening of traditional family and community support systems.

These challenges require more than Government programmes alone. They require the combined efforts of families, communities, faith-based organisations, traditional institutions, civil society, and Government. A strong nation must build both economic prosperity and social resilience. We must invest not only in roads, ports, schools, and hospitals, but also in the values, relationships, and institutions that hold our communities together.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this brings me to the portfolio entrusted to me by my line Minister, the honourable Ro Filipe Tuisawau. For an island nation such as ours, an efficient, safe, and accessible transport system is not a luxury. It is fundamental to inclusive national development, because transport affects almost every Fijian, every single day. Someone will catch the 5.30 a.m bus; a farmer will load *dalo*, cassava, or vegetables into a carrier to take that to the market; a parent will take a child to school; a taxi driver will begin another long day on the road, and a truck driver will transport goods between towns. It is about people's lives; it is about access and opportunity and keeping our economy moving.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Land Transport Authority (LTA) has continued to make significant progress over the past financial year in strengthening governance, embracing innovation, and improving services for the people of Fiji. The LTA has allocated a total of \$38.8 million – \$30.2 million for operations and \$8.6 million for capital projects. Through the implementation of the business process, the engineering programme, and the new Noda digital platform, more transport services are now available online. Licence renewals, public applications, and customer transactions are becoming faster, simpler, and more transparent. These reforms are reducing processing time, improving customers' experience, and ensuring that Government services are accessible whenever and wherever they are needed.

The Government assures the people of Fiji that transport opportunities remain inclusive. In the past year, hundreds of new public service vehicle permits have been issued, including mainly serving rural and maritime communities, where access to transport is essential for economic and social development. Looking ahead, the 2026-2027 National Budget continues this momentum.

The Government, through LTA, will establish a new service centre in Labasa and Nakasi. LTA will also continue to work on fully automated vehicle inspection lanes, extend automatic number plate recognition technology, and strengthen heavy vehicle compliance, and continue implementing long-term public transport reforms through the Greater Suva Public Transport Study.

Work on policy reforms will progress further, including vehicle emissions testing, deregistration policies for aged vehicles, enhanced driver training and preparations for Fiji transition towards cleaner transport technologies, including electric vehicles.

I turn to the issue of congestion – a problem that has been around for many years, for more than a decade. The honourable Leader of the Opposition yesterday made remarks on the travelling times during peak periods of the Suva-Nausori corridor. The honourable Nath also spoke on the issue. However, the truth is, sometime back, the travelling time between Suva-Nausori Corridor during the usual traffic peaks, which was between 6.00 a.m. to 8.00 a.m., ranged from 40 minutes to one hour and 30 minutes along the Princes Road and for the Ratu Mara Kings Road, it was about 40 minutes to 2 hours and 30 minutes. This was heavily dependent on the departure time and your location.

Today, Government, through a special task force comprising of LTA, Fiji Roads Authority

(FRA), Fiji Police Force and Ministry of Transport have reduced travelling time from 30 minutes to one hour along the Ratu Mara Kings Road and 20 to 40 minutes along the Princes Road. A chokepoint and bottleneck problem caused severe back surge along Princes Road, Khalsa Road, Daniva Road and Cunningham Road has been reduced significantly. In the afternoon, due to staggered school and knock-off hours, the travelling time ranges from 20 minutes to 1 hour.

The honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport, on a few occasions in these other towns, spoke on the expansion or the reorientation of roads and bridges such as the Koronivia Bypass, Ratu Dovi Road, Fletcher Road, Princes Road, Queens Highway linking towns, Tamavua-i-Wai Bridge, Lami Bridge and a few others as part of Government measures to address traffic congestion. The Ministry will continue to monitor congestion levels and is prepared to employ other counter-congestion strategies when the situation arises.

Last year, the Government strengthened the enforcement of the deployment of portable speed cameras across the country, the implementation of the P-1 and P-2 provisional driver licensing systems and increased regulatory oversight and extensive public education campaigns.

The Department of Transport in the 2026-2027 Budget provides \$3.6 million to sustain and strengthen Fiji's maritime transport services ensuring reliable, safe and equitable connectivity for maritime communities across the country. This allocation reflects the Government's continued commitment to supporting the unique transport needs of our maritime population and strengthening the resilience of the Fiji maritime network. Of this amount, \$3.3 million is allocated to the shipping franchise scheme to maintain its essential shipping services on uneconomical routes, ensuring that remote maritime island communities continue to receive regular and dependable transport services.

A further \$200,000 is provided for the freight subsidy scheme, which helps reduce the cost of transporting essential goods, construction materials and development supplies to maritime areas. In addition, \$100,000 is allocated to the roving franchise scheme to provide flexible shipping support during emergencies, service disruptions and other foreseen circumstances, thereby ensuring continuity of service when it is needed most.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are an island nation. Our people in Lau, Lomaiviti, Kadavu, Rotuma and Vanua Levu matter too. Our maritime communities are part of our national economy and future. Ferries and maritime vessels are connectors to market, education, healthcare, family and to Government services. We must therefore continue working towards maritime transport services and infrastructure that are safe, reliable and responsive to the needs of our island communities.

That responsibility rests with the Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF). Government recognises that maritime safety cannot be compromised, which is why Government has allocated \$8.1 million as an operating grant and \$1.2 million as a capital grant to the Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji for the 2026-2027 financial year. This funding supports the specialised workforce responsible for inspecting vessels, certifying seafarers, investigating marine incidents, enforcing marine legislation and ensuring Fiji continues to meet its international maritime obligations.

I am particularly pleased that this budget provides funding to rehabilitate four critical navigational lighthouses located at Yadua Island, Makuluva Inlet, Vuda Point and Cape Washington. These lighthouses continue to guide vessels through Fiji waters and remain essential to protecting lives, safeguarding cargo and preserving our maritime environment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, MSAF has delivered significant results across its strategic priorities during the 2025-2026 financial year. The MSAF strengthened maritime safety and compliance through comprehensive vessel inspections, targeted enforcement actions, and safe movement of over 2.4

million passengers, 1.5 million tonnes of cargoes, and the issuance of 18,854 vessel clearances, ensuring the continued safety of Fiji maritime transport network. It enhanced service efficiency by processing 1,252 ship registration applications, certifying 2,861 seafarers, and training 1,430 boat masters, licensed participants, and advancing the digitalisation of licencing and certification services, which will significantly improve customer service and regulatory efficiency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2026-2027 Budget for Government Shipping Services demonstrates Government commitment to maintaining a safe, reliable, and efficient fleet of vessels that serve a critical lifeline for maritime communities and support public service delivery throughout Fiji. Significant funding has also been allocated for essential operational requirements, including:

- \$1.35 million for vessels, fuels, and oil;
- \$1.3 million for vessel repairs and maintenance; and
- \$900,000 for annual vessel surveys and dry docking.

Additional provisions will support navigational aids, office operations, utilities, training, and occupational health and safety requirements, rations, uniforms, and other critical supplies necessary to sustain effective service delivery.

Furthermore, the Government gratefully acknowledges the aid-in-kind contribution from the Government of Japan, valued at \$27.2 million, for the procurement of a Disaster Response Multipurpose Vessel. This significant contribution will greatly enhance Fiji's capacity to respond to natural disasters and emergencies, support the delivery of essential services to the maritime communities, and strengthen national disaster preparedness and response capabilities.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget takes a responsible approach. It recognises the needs of our country are many, but our resources are not unlimited. That is why I call it pragmatic. Pragmatism does not mean that we lack ambition. It means we know where we want to go, but we are realistic about how we get there. We want better and safer roads, reliable public transport, and stronger rural connectivity. We want better maritime services, modern ports, and climate-resilient infrastructure and we want a transport system that supports economic growth and improves the lives of our people. That is the direction. Our responsibility now is delivery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the end of this financial year, our people will not judge us by the number of times we stood in this House and congratulated ourselves on the number of contributions and speeches we make, they will judge us by what changed. Farmers will ask, can I get to the market? The commuter, can I get to work? The family in the maritime islands will ask, can we depend on our connection to the rest of Fiji. Those are the questions that matter.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our job now is to turn the allocations in this budget into action on the ground. Plans into projects. Investment into better services and to make sure that the people of Fiji can see and feel the difference.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is responsible, realistic, pragmatic, and I am proud to support it.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Members of Parliament and our distinguished guests; I rise to fully support the 2026-2027 National Budget and commend the honourable Minister for Finance, Commerce and Business Development, Permanent Secretary and staff for a well-prepared Budget. This Budget reflects the Government's commitment to responsible financial management, sustainable economic growth, and improving the lives of all Fijians through targeted investments in infrastructure and essential services.

Before outlining our priorities for 2026-2027, it is important to acknowledge the significant achievements delivered during the 2025-2026 financial year. These accomplishments demonstrate the Government's continued commitment to strengthening connectivity, building resilience, improving service delivery, and creating economic opportunities for communities across Fiji. Through strategic investments in roads, water, energy, public infrastructure and the Fiji Meteorological Services, tangible improvements have been made to the quality of life of our people, despite what the Opposition has said, while laying a strong foundation for future growth and development.

In the 2026-2027 Budget, the Ministry has allocated a sum of \$820.8 million comprising \$282.3 million for operating expenditure and \$538.5 million for capital expenditure. From this total budget, \$112 million is allocated for the respective departments within the ministry, \$291 million for Water Authority of Fiji, \$370 million for Fiji Roads Authority, \$39 million for Land Transport Authority and \$9 million for Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji. This significant level of investment clearly demonstrates the Coalition Government's commitment to strengthening critical infrastructure that supports economic growth, national development and improving service delivery.

In terms of the roads, before I outline the Fiji Roads Authority's plans and Budget priorities for 2026-2027 financial year, I wish to highlight some significant achievements delivered during the 2025-2026 financial year despite the unprecedented challenges arising from adverse weather conditions, emergency response requirements, ageing infrastructure, fuel emergency the Fiji Roads Authority continued to deliver critical infrastructure projects that strengthened national connectivity, improved safety and supported economic development.

The Authority managed an overall infrastructure budget of \$329 million, achieving 89 percent utilisation rate by June 2026. This reflects the FRA's commitment to effective planning, strong project execution and responsible management.

Major achievement was the successful implementation of the maintenance and renewals programme for roads, bridges and jetties, which was allocated \$279 million and achieved 112 percent utilisation. Through this programme critical maintenance and rehabilitation works were carried out across Fiji, ensuring that our transport assets remain safe, functional and resilient.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, significant progress was made in bridge renewal and rehabilitation projects across the country. Works on the Waidalice Bridge, supported through a budget of education of \$10 million, have advanced steadily with expenditures reaching \$3.4 million during the financial year. The Tamavua-i-wai Bridge Project funded by JICA also projects successfully with approximately \$1.7 million expended.

In Taveuni, construction continued on Balili Bridge, Soqulu 1, 2 and 3 bridges with expenditures reaching \$3.3 million against a total budget of \$7.8 million. Additional funding has been secured to complete Nalele and Naqai Bridges during the upcoming financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, preparatory works have been completed for replacement crossings in Serua, Laselase and Rabi Island which contracts expected to be awarded shortly.

In addition, FRA has completed the planning and procurement activities for the installation of 20 box culvert crossings representing an investment of approximately \$6.6 million. These culvert crossings will be installed across key locations in Ovalau, Viti Levu and Northern Division, improving flood resilience and maintaining access for our rural communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the New Capital Programme, progress has been made in terms of the

Rewa-Vutia Road dredge works, Naisogo-Wainibuku Link Road throughout to Namuamua Road Upgrade and ongoing works along the Saqani and Bua corridors.

The New Capital Community Programme also delivered important community-based infrastructure upgrades to the allocation of \$22 million, with a utilisation rate of 86 percent. This supported the construction of bus shelters, footpaths, foot-fronted ceiling works, school access roads and village road improvements.

Climate resilience remains a key priority for Government in terms of the resilience of roads, seal extensions and vulnerable roads have been upgraded, strengthening infrastructure resilience through coastal regions. Urban infrastructure improvements were also undertaken across Fiji, helping to improve road quality, reduce traffic bottlenecks and strengthen economic productivity.

Recognising the importance of tourism to Fiji's economy, the Authority also continued development of strategic tourism road projects including Wailoko, Enamanu and Biausevu. These investments will improve access to tourism destinations and programmes.

In addition, detailed design work was undertaken for future widening projects on Fletcher Road and Ratu Dovi Road, while planning continues for key transport corridors including Veisari, Laqere Bypass, Naseakula, Wailevu, and the phase upgrade of Ratu Sukuna Road.

For 2026-2027, the FRA has been allocated a total of \$369 million, comprising \$15.7 million for operational expenditure and \$354 million for capital investment. A significant allocation of \$108 million has been dedicated to maintaining our existing infrastructure assets.

Recognising the importance of road safety, the Government has also allocated \$8.5 million for road safety initiatives, including line marking improvements and targeted safety measures across the national road network. Fiji's road network currently consists of approximately 6,375 kilometres of roads, 1,388 bridges and crossings, and 32 jetties.

During the coming financial year, approximately \$21.6 million has been allocated to refurbish and replace 13 priority bridges, including Waidalice, Koronivia, Savu 5, Gatward Bridge, Balili, Soqulu Bridge, and the Nalele Bridge. The upgrading of Koronivia Bridge will be treated as a priority given the access situation to Suva. The bridge also serves as a critical transport link for communities. As already mentioned, crossing and culvert upgrades will be continued across the country.

Maritime infrastructure also remains equally important for island and maritime communities. The FRA will continue rehabilitation works on Savusavu, Waiyevo, and Ellington jetties, while progressing construction of the Vunikura and Korolevu jetties, funded by the People's Republic of China.

Improving connectivity also remains a key Government priority. As already mentioned, the Rewa Vutia, Nasauvakarua, Nasavusavitoga, Vuirailai, and the Nasau-Naivaka Road in Bua. These projects will provide safer and more reliable access to schools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, community infrastructure investments will also continue, including the construction of new bus shelters throughout the various divisions. The Government has allocated \$2 million for coastal protection works along vulnerable road corridors, and a further \$3 million for seal extension works. These investments will protect critical infrastructure from coastal erosion.

We have also mentioned the Critical Bridges Project, the ongoing works regarding the priority bridges at Lami, Medrukutu, Sabeto and Veseisei. These bridges are essential in terms of

our access.

In addition, the People's Republic of China-funded Vanua Levu Roads project, which is valued at approximately \$300 million, is currently under contract bidding and is expected to significantly improve transport connectivity across the island.

On water sector, the Water Authority of Fiji was allocated \$284.4 million during the 2025-2026 Budget, comprising \$132.7 million for Operational Expenditure and \$151.7 million for Capital Expenditure. The Authority had utilised \$136.06 million in capital investments.

One of the major achievements was the 4,947 new water connections and 241 new wastewater connections. In Central Division, the Totogo Reservoir Replacement Project in Levuka, valued at \$2.3 million, significantly improved water security for approximately 2,800 residents was completed. The Naqali Village Water Mains Project, the Western Division and Mate Road Water Extension Project, all these projects contributed to the significant improvements in water access for our population.

One of the key main ones too is the Tamavua Packaged Water Treatment Plant. This is currently under construction stage, designed to strengthen water production capacity for Suva areas, and the Elevated Princes Road Water Supply Project, which will provide reliable 24-hour water supply to approximately 14,000 residents as we move forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government remains committed to ensuring that rural communities share equally in the benefits of national development. The Water Authority of Fiji continues to contribute rural water projects across the region. In addition to the Rain Harvesting Programme, a lot has been raised about skills issues regarding our people. The Water Authority of Fiji has launched an important apprenticeship programme in partnership with Fiji National University (FNU). A total of 86 apprentices, including 30 women and 56 men, have commenced structured training and employment within the Water Authority of Fiji.

Building on these achievements, the Coalition Government has allocated a total of \$291 million to the Water Authority of Fiji for the 2026-2027 financial year. Allocation comprises \$132.9 million in operational and \$157 million in capital expenditure.

The largest share of capital funding is allocated to the water programme which receives \$81.3 million. This funding will support the upgrading of treatment plants, water sources, pipelines, and distribution networks. One of the key projects in the Central Division, as I already mentioned, is the Suva Water Mains Upgrade, valued at \$18 million, which will strengthen water security for approximately 15,000 Fijians.

The government has also allocated \$2 million for design works associated with the Rewa River Water Supply Scheme - Stage 2, which will eventually double the treatment capacity of the Viriya Water Treatment Plant and benefit approximately 160,000 residents in the Suva-Nausori Corridor.

The Government has also allocated \$3 million for the critical river crossing programme, designed to protect vital water infrastructure from flood damage and improve service reliability. In the Northern Division, investments in new reservoirs, trunk mains and water supply improvements will support future population growth.

Reducing non-revenue water, as we have already alluded to in the House, remains a key priority. \$2.7 million has been allocated to leak detection, pressure management, and network

improvements. In addition, \$15.6 million has been allocated to the wastewater programme, an increase of \$3.3 million over the previous year.

A major component of this investment is the Denarau Island Infrastructure Upgrade Programme, allocated \$6 million. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government remains committed to supporting rural communities, \$10 million has been allocated under the Rural Water Programme, working closely with the Ministry of Lands Programme on borehole development to spread the benefits of water access across our rural communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$8 million has been allocated under the Emergency Programme. The operational budget, as I have already mentioned, \$132 million provides repairs and maintenance, fuel, treatment of chemicals, and very important in terms of our employees, as you can see, they work through day and night and also through sun and rain. Before I move on, I think it is very important at this stage to correct some of the misinformation which has been shared to us by the Opposition.

One of the major misinformation which is spreading, not only here, but also through the public, through the media, is about the debt situation. The debt situation- I am not sure whether they read the budget documents or not. For example, if you go to the Charges on Accounts and Public Debt Overseas Loans Interest Payments, if you look at that, there's a list of approximately 68 projects there, 68 loans, and the majority of these were before we came in.

Not only that, but these are also ongoing projects. At least 50 out of the 68 listed were from the last government or initiated by them and approximately 60 under the Coalition Government. Some of these are ongoing projects as already mentioned, and the Opposition needs to stop misleading Fiji about debt. Stop misleading Fiji about debt not only the Opposition but also all the parties who have been registered who have been registered who are not in this house. They continue to mislead the nation about debt.

When you talk about that it is funding development. That needs to be clear. Please read the budget document properly. The other one they continue to mislead the people of Fiji about this Coalition Government has been the worst Government in terms of debt and financial management. Let me just say this, it is in here. Number one, debt under Bainimarama rule rose from \$2.8 billion in 2006 to \$9.7 billion in 2022 - an increase of \$6.9 billion. If you break that down from 2014 to 2022, during the FijiFirst (maybe you do want to disassociate yourself from the 2006), \$4.08 billion to \$9.7 billion – an increase of \$5.62 billion debt.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- How many years?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- For the Coalition Government, \$9.7 billion to \$12.5 billion, an increase of \$2.8 billion. So, it is nothing extraordinary, like you are putting it out to be. Come on! You are going on about dramatic language, the economy is collapsing, and the finances are in chaos; no.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Tell them!

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Just read that and you can see.

If you look at table 15, record revenues have been collected under this Government from 2023 to 2027, it ranged from \$3.6 billion to \$4.4 billion, while under the previous government, they never reached that in terms of revenue collection. Those are record revenues under the Coalition Government. Under FijiFirst, the mediocre revenues and record net deficit compared to the last three years of the Coalition Government. FijiFirst in 2021, had \$1.22 billion deficit, compared to the

Coalition Government 2026-2027 of \$1.045 billion deficit, which is less.

HON. J. USAMATE.- COVID year.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Yes, I know, but the honourable Maharaj is saying that under this Government, Fiji experienced the worst deficit, which is just factually incorrect. It is just misleading. If you look under debt as a percentage of GDP, 2006 was 53.8 percent to 2022 with 91.8 percent while 2026, the Coalition Government has reduced that to 82 percent. If you look at the total principal loan repayment, the highest ever was FijiFirst Government - \$674 million in 2021-2022, while in 2026-2027, under the Coalition Government, it reduced to \$436 million, a reduction of \$238 million, which all points to prudent financial management. It is not irresponsible, it is not chaos, but it is prudent financial management.

Going back to some of the issues raised by the Opposition, honourable Premila Kumar is criticizing the writing off of student debt. Are you suggesting that we bring back the student debt and run after all these students to pay their debt? Is that what you want? That is totally anti-student, and the students need to know about that, that you will chase them to pay their debt.

She also raised about court case costs. The budget covers court case costs. Of course, we have to cover it because a lot of those court cases originated from your time. For example, one of the MSAF cases, they have been asked to pay maybe close to half a million. It is from the FijiFirst Government time. There is another one there with Fiji Roads Authority, approximately \$27 million. It originated from your time. We have to budget for your mistakes.

Honourable Sanjay Kirpal wants the VAT removed. If you remove that, this is totally financially nonsensical. How will you raise revenue? We need to talk sense here.

Honourable Rinesh Sharma is not here. He stated that USP students are eating noodles and biscuits. One of the main reasons for that was because the USP Dining Hall was closed, so by who and under which government? During the FijiFirst under the Vice-Chancellor appointed by your government.

Honourable Ketan Lal continues to praise FijiFirst and the leadership of honourable Bainimarama. You continue to praise. Can you not think rationally, please, for once?

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

Can the honourable Minister bring his intervention to an end, please?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- When the Bainimarama *coup* happened in 2006, \$350 million EU funding allocated for restructuring and modernisation of mills, improved farm practices and diversified livelihoods in the sugar industry was cut off. Can you think rationally instead of blindly following? We just need to be truthful.

I do not know why honourable Maharaj is criticising Fiji Airways because a lot of the Fiji Airways loans were from which time? It was from FijiFirst time. He was part of that and the Directors he criticises, majority are commercial and professional people, not political appointees. It is very important that we support Fiji Airways because that is the lifeline of tourism in our nation.

I support the Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- I have allowed a bit of a leeway at the end just to make everyone relaxed. I thank you honourable Members for your presence and contributions today. We will continue with the Batting Order tomorrow morning. Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of the sitting. You travel safely home, and I wish everyone a good night rest tonight. Parliament stands adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 8.12 p.m.