PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

WEDNESDAY, 15TH JULY, 2026

[CORRECTED COPY]

CONTENTS

WEDNESDAY, 15TH JULY, 2026

The Parliament met at 9.37 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Minister for Foreign Affairs and External Trade; the honourable Minister for Immigration; honourable S.S. Kirpal and honourable J.N. Nand.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Tuesday, 14th 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 all honourable Members to today's sitting. I also welcome those joining us in the gallery and those watching the live proceedings on television and the internet. Thank you for your continued interest in the workings of your Parliament.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE 2026-2027 APPROPRIATION BILL 2026

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and fellow citizens; I rise today to support the 2026-2027 National Budget. I wish to express my gratitude to the honourable Prime Minister for his steady leadership and to the honourable Minister for Finance for crafting a budget that is both, fiscally responsible and socially compassionate.

I want to remind our farmers that this Budget is not just a document of numbers - it is a promise that shows sweat and sacrifice on the foundation upon which we are building a new, resilient Fiji. This Government views agriculture, waterways and sugar as an engine of economic sustainability.

For the first time in over a decade, the non-sugar agriculture sector has received its highest ever allocation of $134.7 million. This is an increase of 8.2 percent. The Ministry's total allocation of $221.1 million is designed to fight food insecurity, reduce food imports, mitigate the impact of global economic, social and climate change, and drive commercial revolution in rural communities.

When this Government invested $150 million into the non-agriculture sugar sector in the 2025-2026 financial year, we did so with confidence that agriculture would deliver returns for our economy, our communities and our future. Today, I am pleased to report to the people of Fiji that that investment has had significant impacts. The Ministry distributed 1.6 million planting material to crop extension programmes and $500,000 more through our research programmes.

In our livestock sector, the Ministry assisted 950 livestock farmers with 2,500 improved breeding stock of sheep, goats, pigs and poultry. Infrastructure is the lifeline of farmers. Through this year's budget, the Ministry upgraded 61.5 kilometres of farm road. To a farmer in the interior and in the maritime islands, that road is the difference between a crop rotting in the field and a crop sold in the market. It is the difference between poverty and a pay cheque.

The Ministry completed 149 drainage and irrigation projects and protected 14 entire communities from encroaching tides and rising rivers through coastal and flood protection intervention. In 2025, Fiji recorded a historic $187.2 million in fresh and frozen food in livestock export. This represents a remarkable 17.5 percent increase compared to 2024. This is the highest value of fresh and frozen agriculture export achieved in the past decade.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has set a bold, visionary and achievable target. By 2030, Fiji will achieve $1 billion in fresh and frozen non-agriculture exports, and to prove this, we are not merely spending money, we are planting seeds that yield massive harvest for the Fijian economy, as follows:

- Yaqona Programme, supported by $2 million, is now generating $79.1 million in export earnings.
- Dalo Programme, supported by only $1 million, is generating $38.9 million in export earnings.
- Spices Programme (Turmeric), supported by a modest $300,000, is generating a staggering $32.1 million in export earnings.
- Ginger Programme, supported by $900,000, is generating $6.5 million in export earnings.

Those figures demonstrate that agriculture is creating opportunities for rural communities, women, youth, and the next generation of agri-preneurs.

The agriculture sector has reached approximately $1.5 billion in real GDP value, contributing 12.8 percent to Fiji's real GDP in 2024. I congratulate the farmers, processors, exporters, staff, intergovernmental agencies and all those involved in the agriculture sector with these achievements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government's investment of $221 million in agriculture, waterways and the sugar industry will be directed towards five key priority areas aligned to our Strategic Development Plan, the Non-Sugar Agriculture Sector Policy, Gender and Youth in Agriculture Policy, and the National Organic Policy. Our vision is clear, "Building a resilient, productive, inclusive, and commercially driven agriculture sector."

The five strategic priorities for 2026-2027 are as follows:

(1) Improve food and nutrition security for all of Fijians, ensuring that every household has access to safe, nutritious, and affordable food.
(2) Improve livelihood for farming households by increasing farmers' income, creating employment opportunities and empowering women, youth and rural communities.
(3) Improve the adoption of sustainable resource management and climate-smart agriculture to strengthen resilience against climate change, natural disasters and external shocks,

including the current fuel crisis.

(4) Increase commercial agriculture through enhanced production, mechanisation, market access, value addition, agro-processing and export development.

(5) Improve Ministry performance and service delivery through modernising agricultural institutions, strengthening extension services, advancing digital agriculture and ensuring that Government services reach out to every farming community across Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the allocations under each priority below are designed to deliver measurable outcomes.

Priority 1: Food and Nutrition Security

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with a total allocation of $1 million, efforts to reduce import dependence will be strengthened through investment in food security initiatives. Of this, $0.9 million is allocated for home gardening, backyard poultry farming and school gardening programmes to boost local food production, while the remaining $0.1 million will support the Food Security Multi-Sector Programme to enhance policy coordination, food and nutrition planning, stakeholder collaboration and monitoring of the national food security outcome under the Horizon 2030: Fiji Food System Plan.

The 2026-2027 Budget allocated $2 million to strengthen biosecurity and termite control efforts, reinforcing Fiji's commitment to protecting its agriculture environment, biodiversity, and infrastructure from invasive pests.

Priority 2: Livelihoods and Farming Households

Mr. Speaker, Sir, because the 2026-2027 Budget allocates $8.24 million for human resource development in our rural Fiji, the Ministry is proud to continue its support for the Tutu Training Centre and Navuso Agriculture Technical Institute. We are also expanding the Youth in Agri-preneurship Acceleration Programme and the Women in Agriculture Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to announce that there is an increase in Fertilizer and Weedicide Subsidy Programme from $1 million to $3 million in the non-sugar sector to lower the cost of production for *yaqona*, *dalo*, ginger, rice, cassava and turmeric. The Ministry will continue to provide targeted extension programmes for the Goat, Sheep, Piggery and Poultry Extension Programme. The Ministry will work closely with the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection to modernise existing women resource centres and transform them into community-based productive hubs.

Priority 3: Sustainable Resource Management and Climate-Smart Agriculture

Mr. Speaker, Sir, $31.6 million is allocated towards improving sustainable resource management and climate-smart agriculture. Climate change is no longer a distant threat; it is the defining challenge of our generation. For Fiji's agricultural sector, resilience is a fundamental requirement for survival and growth. This is a deliberate investment in the future where our farmers do not just survive the storm but thrive despite it. The Ministry is allocating $10 million to equip Fijian farmers with the knowledge and technologies of the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is directing $21.1 million, the largest portion of this priority, towards Land and Water Management. We are fortifying our landscape, and this funding will drive watershed management, coastal protection, and critical drainage works to shield our communities from the increasing frequency of floods and droughts.

However, we are scaling up our Animal Waste Management Programme to $500,000, which is allocated to an initiative that turns waste into biogas, reducing our reliance on imported fuel and lowering the carbon footprint of our livestock sector.

Priority 4: Commercial Agriculture

This is where we create jobs, encourage import substitution, increase our exports and earn the foreign exchange our nation needs. This year's Budget allocates $9.2 million to support commercial production of priority commodities such as *dalo*, *yaqona*, ginger, cocoa, coffee, coconut, dairy, rice, spices, pineapple, cassava, fruits and vegetable.

These investments will be supported through a comprehensive package of interventions in commodity development, commercial livestock programmes, livestock breeding and genetic improvement, agricultural research and technology development, mechanisation, farm infrastructure, land clearing and preparation services.

On the Sugar Sector, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government remains committed to supporting our sugar industry during its ongoing structural transition and diversification. The Sugar Industry allocation records a modest reduction of 3.8 percent from $100.2 million in 2026 to $96.3 million in 2026-2027, reflecting a strategic realignment of resources rather than a withdrawal of support.

While allocations for fertiliser subsidy and cane access roads have been slightly reduced. the Government has increased funding for the Sugar Stabilisation Fund by 10.1 percent, from $37.8 million to $41.6 million, to strengthen cane payment support and stabilise farmer income during this period. This demonstrates our commitment to ensuring that sugarcane growers continue to adapt to changing economic and production realities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reduction in the sugar fertiliser subsidy should also be viewed within the broader context of the Government's support to the agriculture sector as a whole. The funding has not been removed from agriculture, rather it has been reallocated to support diversification and resilience among farming households. Farmers who choose to diversify from sugarcane into other agricultural commodities will continue to benefit from fertiliser assistance provided under the non-sugar agriculture programme. They will also have access to commodity development initiatives, mechanisation support, extensive services, training programmes and market development opportunities available across the wider agriculture sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the farm access road funding across the agriculture sector is approximately $6 million, benefiting both sugar and non-sugar farming communities, and is aimed at reducing transportation costs, improving farm connectivity and facilitating access to markets.

These adjustments within the sugar budget represent a strategic redistribution of resources within the Ministry to promote resilience, strengthen farmer incomes and create new growth opportunities through a more diversified and sustainable agriculture sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2026-2027 Budget allocates approximately $2.2 million towards agricultural research programmes directly supporting commercial agriculture. These investments include research on horticulture crops, root crops, tree crops, fruit trees, rice, *yaqona*, seed and planting material development, and protected agriculture system.

The 2026-2027 Budget also allocates $10.6 million to livestock programmes that will support dairy development, commercial livestock development, livestock breeding, animal health systems, feed technology, disease control and processing infrastructure.

In the Dairy Development Programme, the increase from $2.9 million to $4 million reflects the Government's commitment to strengthening domestic milk production and reducing import dependence. The Budget also doubles funding for the Commercial Livestock Development Programme from $300,000 to $600,000. The Ministry will continue investments in livestock feed technology, animal disease eradication and the upgrading of Abattoirs for food safety standards, processing capacity and market readiness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, $31.2 million is budgeted for Farm Access Roads, Commercial Agriculture Development Programme, Commercial Farm Equity Packages, Mechanisation Support and Sugar Industry Farm Infrastructure Programmes. The increase in the Farm Access Road funding to $4 million demonstrates the Government's commitment to reducing transportation costs and improving market connectivity.

Priority 5: Improve Ministry Performance and Service Delivery

The Budget provides a strategic allocation of $15.6 million under Priority 5. This investment targets strengthening institutional performance, modernising service delivery systems and the ability to support farmers across Fiji. The Ministry provides dedicated funding for the upgrade and enhancement of agriculture offices, research stations, staff quarters, veterinary clinics, and specialised laboratories.

The Budget provides $715,000 for the procurement of quad bikes, fibreglass boats and outboard engines. This ensures that our officers reach farmers in the most difficult-to-access locations. This $15.6 million allocation is a commitment to excellence. We are building a Ministry that is not just a provider of services, but a partner in prosperity to lead Fiji’s agriculture into the digital age.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is a declaration of intent. It is a promise to the farmers that their hard work will be rewarded with returns on their investments. It is a promise to the young graduates that agriculture is a high-tech, high return career path. It is a promise to every Fijian family that their food security is our highest priority. We are building a Fiji that is self-reliant - a Fiji that does not just participate in the global economy but leads it in the sector where we have a natural God-given advantage. Our destination is $1 billion in 2030. Our path is innovation. Our strength is our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to sincerely acknowledge the unwavering commitment, dedication and hard work of our staff serving across the Ministry’s geographical stations throughout Fiji. Your professionalism, resilience and tireless efforts in delivering essential services have greatly contributed to the Ministry's achievements in the 2025-2026 financial year, reflecting your collective commitment to serving the people of Fiji with excellence and integrity.

As we enter the 2026-2027 financial year, I encourage you to continue building on this strong foundation and maintaining the highest standard of public service. We must embrace the integration of the Sugar Industry into the Ministry of Agriculture, Waterways and Sugar Industry by working together with unity, innovation, accountability and commitment to deliver improved services and sustainable outcome for our farmers, stakeholders and all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend and support the 2026-2027 Budget.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, Members of Parliament, fellow Fijians and all those watching the livestream today; there are budgets that manage governments and there are budgets that change the course of a nation. The true measure of a national budget is not how much it spends, nor how many announcements it contains, nor how loudly it is applauded on Budget Day. Its true measure is whether it leaves the nation more prosperous than it found, whether it creates opportunity where there was once uncertainty, whether it inspires confidence where there was once hesitation, whether it expands the productive capacity of the economy so that the future generations inherit greater opportunity rather than greater obligation. That, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the standard against which every budget should be judged.

Today, I wish to assess this budget not through the lens of politics, Mr. Speaker, but through the lens of economics, public financial management and nation building because governments come and go, political parties rise and fall, but our country remains. Every decision made in this Chamber will affect generations who will not even know our names. That is why budgets deserve more than applause - they deserve scrutiny.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I turn to the substance of this Budget, let me acknowledge those whose work often goes unnoticed in debates such as this, and I refer to the public servants of the Ministry of Finance, the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service, the Reserve Bank of Fiji, the Bureau of Statistics, and the many officials across Government agencies who work tirelessly to manage the nation's finances.

Governments change, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Ministers come and go, politics and priorities evolve, but the institutional memory, technical expertise and professionalism of our public servants remain essential to the stability of the country. The preparation of a national budget is a complex undertaking requiring economic forecasting, fiscal modelling, debt management, expenditure planning and extensive consultation. Whatever criticisms may be made of the policy choices contained in this Budget, those criticisms should not diminish the considerable effort of those officials who have worked diligently to produce it. They have managed difficult fiscal circumstances, increasing debt obligations, external economic shocks, and competing demands on limited resources. For that service to Fiji, they deserve the acknowledgement and gratitude of this Parliament. Our disagreement today is not with the professionalism of those who prepared the advice - our disagreement is with the decisions that were ultimately made.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, having said that, it is precisely because the challenges facing Fiji are so serious that this Budget is ultimately disappointing, not because it lacks expenditure, not because it lacks announcements, not because it lacks good intentions - it is disappointing because it lacks a coherent strategy for transforming the productive capacity of the Fijian economy. This Budget asks if Government can continue funding today's obligations. This Budget tries to put a band-aid on a poorly managed economy. This Budget tells how this Government will fund their expenses today, but it does not answer what our next generation will do. It does not adequately answer how Fiji will create tomorrow's wealth, and that is the central weakness that runs through this entire document. This Budget fails to build tomorrow's prosperity.

On Fiji's economic reality, Mr. Speaker, if we are to have an honest debate about this Budget, then we must first have an honest conversation about the state of the Fijian economy. The reality is this, Fiji today is not facing a temporary budget problem - Fiji is facing a structural economic challenge. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), in its most recent Article 4 consultation, acknowledged the resilience of the Fijian economy and the recovery that has occurred since the pandemic. However, it also issued a clear warning, contrary to what was said yesterday by the honourable Minister for Local Government.

Growth is slowing, public debt remains elevated, external imbalances are widening, structural bottlenecks remain unresolved, and Fiji continues to be vulnerable to external shocks and natural disaster. Real GDP growth is projected to slow from 3.2 percent in 2025 to 2.4 percent in 2026, public debt is projected to remain above 80 percent of GDP. The current account deficit is expected to widen significantly. Foreign reserve coverage is projected to weaken over the medium term.

Mr. Speaker, these are not opposition figures, nor are they speculative figures - these are assessments of international institutions, informed by the data provided by Fiji's own economic agencies, and they tell us something important. The economy is not in crisis, but nor can it afford complacency. The warning lights are flashing. Foundations are weakening and yet, this Budget offers no serious plans to address the structural weaknesses that are constraining growth and limiting opportunity.

The real challenge, Mr. Speaker, is productivity. The greatest mistake governments make is confusing symptoms with causes. When growth slows, they talk about growth. When revenues fall, they talk about revenue. When debt rises, they talk about debt. However, the real question is always deeper, Mr. Speaker. Why? Why is growth slowing? Why is investment not accelerating? Why do we still have a $6 billion pipeline that exists? Why do wages remain under pressure? Why are governments constantly struggling to balance competing demands?

The answer is productivity. The wealth of nations is ultimately determined not by how much they spend, but how much they produce. A nation becomes wealthier when workers become more productive, when businesses become more efficient, when innovation accelerates, when infrastructure lowers costs, when regulations support enterprises rather than obstruct it, when investment creates value.

Productivity is the engine for prosperity and yet productivity is largely absent from this Budget. We have spending, we have allocations, we have announcements, but where is the national productivity strategy? Where is the plan to lift output per worker? Where is the programme to increase competitiveness? Where is the roadmap to create a higher income economy? The central economic challenge facing Fiji remains largely unanswered.

A nation losing its talent is our problem also, Mr. Speaker. One of the greatest economic challenges confronting Fiji today is not receiving the attention it deserves. Our nation is losing it people - our nurses are leaving, our teachers are leaving, our tradespeople are leaving, our engineers are leaving, our accountants are leaving and our young graduates are leaving. These are not simply statistics - they represent the skills, the experience and innovation that every economy depends upon to grow and prosper.

The IMF has identified labour shortages and outward migration as a significant constraint on Fiji's future economic growth and productivity. This should concern every single member of this House, because when skilled people leave, businesses struggle to find qualified workers. When businesses cannot find the skills they need, productivity declines. When productivity declines, economic growth slows, and when revenues come under pressure, government is increasingly reliant on borrowing to finance essential services and development.

Mr. Speaker, the challenge before us is, therefore, much greater than simply retaining our people - it is about building an economy that –

- gives our people a compelling reason to remain;
- offers quality jobs;
- rewards hard work with high wages;
- creates opportunities for innovation, entrepreneurship and professional growth; and
- gives our young people the confidence that their future can be built here in Fiji.

Unfortunately, this Budget does not present a credible strategy to achieve that outcome. There is no –

- comprehensive workforce development strategy;
- national skills and capability plan aligned to the future needs of our economy;
- meaningful talent retention strategy;
- clear vision for the economy that today's young Fijians will inherit and we have a massive young population.

A budget should not merely account for where money is spent. It should demonstrate how a nation intends to retain its greatest asset and in case the Government has forgotten, it is our people. On this critical issue, I believe this Budget falls well short of what Fiji wants. Where is the growth strategy, Mr. Speaker?

A national budget should be far more than an annual statement of revenue and expenditure. It should be more than a collection of tax measures. It should be more than an appropriation of public funds. A budget should –

- provide a clear economic vision;
- tell businesses where the economy is heading;
- give investors' confidence to invest;
- give workers confidence to build their careers;
- give young people confidence that their future here lies in Fiji and, above all,
- answer one fundamental question, how will this nation become more prosperous?

After carefully considering the Budget, I find that question largely unanswered. The budget explains how Government intends to spend money, but it does not adequately explain how Fiji intends to create wealth. We all know how the wealth is created. We all know what sector actually improves our growth and what sector drives economic growth. There is an important distinction between managing an economy and growing an economy, and one is about distributing existing resources. The other is about expanding the opportunities available to every Fijian.

How many opportunities have been detailed in this particular Budget for our young Fijians? That is why I ask this Government –

- where is Fiji's long-term growth strategy?
- where is the strategy that identifies the industries that are capable of driving sustained economic where is growth over the next decade?
- where is the strategy that moves Fiji beyond recovering from economic shocks towards building enduring prosperity?
- where is the incentivization?
- where is the export strategy?
- how do we intend to increase the value of what Fiji produces and sells to the world?
- how do we diversify beyond our traditional exports?
- how do we help Fijian businesses reach new regional and international markets?
- where is the manufacturing strategy?
- how do we encourage greater value addition, exporting of our raw products?

Sugar being one of them, Mr. Speaker. How do we build industries that create skilled employment, improve productivity and reduce our dependence on imported goods? Where is the investment attraction strategy? Global investment is becoming increasingly competitive, Mr. Speaker. Capital flows to countries that provide certainty, efficiency and clear policy direction. What sectors are we targeting? What competitive advantages are we promoting? What reforms will make Fiji the preferred investment destination in the Pacific?

I see our neighbours moving on in leaps and bounds. Where is the digital economic strategy that we have been hearing about constantly for the past four years? Digital transformation is no longer just optional - it is becoming the foundation of productivity, innovation and economic competitiveness. How will Government support these digital businesses?

We are still lagging way behind, Mr. Speaker. Where is the National Artificial Intelligence Strategy? Artificial intelligence is transforming every major economy. It is changing healthcare, it is changing education, agriculture, financial services, manufacturing and public administration. Of course, all of that comes with caution.

Countries around the world are investing in AI capability because they recognise tomorrow's productivity gains will come from today's technological investment. How will we prepare our workforce? How will we develop ethical governance? How will we support businesses to adopt these particular technologies? Where is the competitiveness strategy? How do we reduce the cost of business? How do we increase productivity?

Competitiveness, Mr. Speaker, is not achieved through aspiration alone - it requires deliberate policy choices. Where is the national logistics strategy? For an island nation, transport and logistics are not secondary issue - they are central to economic growth, efficient ports, reliable shipping, modern airports, integrated freight systems, lower transport costs. We have just seen recently the issues with all of these with respect to little old Taveuni. These determine whether businesses can compete and whether consumers can afford and can access affordable goods.

Where is the long-term infrastructure strategy? Infrastructure should not be viewed merely as construction - it is an investment in national productivity. Every road, every bridge, every port, every digital network, every water system and every energy project should form a part of a coherent national development plan that supports future economic growth rather than simply meeting today's immediate needs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of infrastructure, we have a perfectly good plan to solve issues with respect to infrastructure, creating jobs and creating more areas for investment, et cetera, which was between Nadi and Lautoka, but that got entirely shelved. Now, there is another feasibility study going on with respect to getting the capacity issues sorted out by putting up the sides of the road that are there. Why? Is that creating employment? No! You are spending more money to do a feasibility study. We cannot continue also, Mr. Speaker, to expose our economy to global fuel price volatility without a clear pathway towards greater energy resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the simplest solution could have been if we established the very way we have the Sugar Stabilisation Fund and a Fuel Stabilisation Fund. That could have been started. That could have been done. It is being done in many other small countries, because we are price takers. All of that, and the models of which actually still lie with the Ministries, just has not been progressed. A word to the honourable Minister for Finance, have a look at it. It might be solving one of our problems.

Where is our roadmap for renewable energy? What is the strategy for energy storage, for grid modernisation, for electrification and strategy for reducing long-term energy costs for households and businesses? Energy Fiji Limited (EFL) is still not paying enough to people who want to establish massive solar farms. The EFL is not giving them enough for them to invest in that industry. We have large tracts of land being made available by our landowners, but EFL does not pay enough. What have they done? They move across to our Pacific Island neighbours where they are being offered more for renewable energy projects.

Mr. Speaker, these are not academic questions. They are not theoretical exercises. They are the very questions that determine whether our economy grows or merely survives. Prosperity is the product of vision. Prosperity requires planning and demands investment. The Government simply cannot budget for the next financial year. They must prepare the nation for the next generation.

Mr. Speaker, when historians look back on greater economic transformations, they rarely remember the annual budgets. They remember the vision. Singapore had a vision, Ireland had a vision, Mauritius had a vision, and Estonia had a vision. Fiji needs a vision. These countries understood something fundamental. Budgets do not create prosperity. Strategies create prosperity. Budgets merely finance them.

Mr. Speaker, there is no compelling national economic vision. There is administration, but little transformation. The nation deserves to know, not simply how our money will be spent, the nation deserves to know what future we are building, because a budget is not a collection of appropriations. A budget is a financial expression of a national strategy, and without strategy, expenditure becomes administration. People of Fiji deserve more than that. People deserve a responsible, prudent government that knows how to bring prosperity to every Fijian in this country. People deserve better.

Mr. Speaker, I have a few seconds left and I wish to highlight that there are sectors that obviously also require full growth. I am referring to agriculture, fisheries, manufacturing, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and export. Why have not they been incentivised?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to address one or two more things and share a little bit of history with respect to our sugar and the sugar industry that probably needs to be repeated in this House. The sugar industry formed the backbone of this country for many years. I should know, my late father was quite heavily involved in it right from day one and there are two people who have said many good things about the sugar industry when it started. One was the late Ratu Kamisese Mara, who actually gave a phenomenal speech at the Commonwealth Seminar, which was titled, Challenges to the Sugarcane Industry in the 1980s.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today, the Fijian sugar industry is a shadow of what it used to be. There were four things that Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara pointed out that were very important during his address that took place at the backdrop of major global shifts. He stressed about unit partnership across the entire sector, and he argued that this was not simply an export crop, rather it was a cornerstone of Fiji's social and economic stability. He basically opposed quotas on the world market in exchange for compensation, insisting that developing countries like Fiji, deserve dignity and economic autonomy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the dramatic reconfiguration of Fiji's political landscape post-1987 damaged the sugar industry. The solutions do not lie in simplistic fixes, however, in consensus, bipartisanship and sustained dialogue. Unity and partnership have to replace the fragmentation and the mistrust. Rather than relying solely on Government directives, the industry has to actually function as a shared commercial enterprise in which the farmers, the millers, the transport operators and regulators see themselves as partners with common goals.

Yesterday, honourable Pillay said something very intelligent, and everyone should listen. He told the farmers, "It does not matter about the price, please, go and harvest your cane. Otherwise, you are going to end up with nothing." That kind of spirit does not exist anymore, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The industry's survival depends on creating value and profitability rather than indefinite subsidies. We have seen a lot of commentaries with respect to that but, please, we must respect that industry. It formed the cornerstone and the backbone of Fiji's economy.

With respect to tourism and the tourism tax, Mr. Speaker, there needs to be something said about this. You cannot tax the tourism industry to support another industry. What are we going to do the next time? Are we going to tax the tourism industry to bail out the sugar industry? Are we going to tax the tourism industry to bail out the agriculture industry?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.-You cannot continue to do that. There are other ways and means to do it. Go and have a chat with all the tourism operators. It does not work like that.

Dialogue, Mr. Speaker, must prevail over conflict. Transparent communications, planning and genuine consultation with everyone - with landowners, with farmers and institutions such as the iTaukei Land Trust Board (iTLTB), are necessary to rebuild trust and secure long-term arrangements with respect to land and investment stability across all sectors, whether it is tourism or sugar.

Let us not waste those words of the late Tui Nayau and my late father who actually fought very hard with respect to that particular industry, to bring it to what it was, in terms of glory and there is a way to solve that. As I have said, it requires dialogue and bipartisanship, not what we saw over the weekend in Rakiraki, but good-spirit negotiations with respect to how it happens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think I have gone over my time. I appreciate you giving me extra time. I do not support the Budget.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, Members of Parliament, and members of the public joining us virtually; *bula vinaka* and a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I begin my contribution to this important debate, I first wish to acknowledge and give thanks to Almighty God for his abundant grace, wisdom, and guidance upon our beloved nation and upon the People's Coalition Government, since we are entrusted with the responsibility of leading this nation from 24th December, 2022.

When this Government came into office, we inherited a nation that was emerging from years of challenges. Challenges that affected public confidence, strained institutions, and placed pressure on many ordinary Fijian families. We knew from the outset that the responsibility entrusted to us was not an easy one. It required courage, it required humility, and commitment to put the interests of the people first.

Over the past three and a half years, this Government has faced significant challenges. Global economic uncertainty, rising cost of living, natural disasters, the impact of previous policy decisions, and the ongoing task of rebuilding trust between citizens and public institutions. Yet, through every challenge, God has remained faithful. His grace has sustained us. His wisdom has guided us. His blessings have enabled this Government to continue serving the people of Fiji with humility, purpose, and determination.

In Proverbs 3:5-6, He remind us: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your understanding. In all your ways, submit to Him, and He will make your path straight." These words remind us that leadership is not only about making decisions. It is about seeking wisdom, acting with humility, and recognising that our responsibility is ultimately to serve something greater than ourselves, the people we represent and the nation we have been entrusted to lead.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government has remained focused on delivering commitments we made to the people of Fiji. We promised to restore confidence in our democratic institutions. We strengthen accountability. We rebuild trust in government and create a more inclusive society where every Fijian has an opportunity to progress. We acknowledge that not every challenge can be resolved overnight. The work of rebuilding a nation requires patience, partnership and perseverance. But what matters, is that this Government has chosen to confront these challenges honestly, responsibly, rather than ignore them.

It is with the same spirit of gratitude, humility and responsibility that I rise today in support of the 2026-2027 National Budget, appropriately themed; "*A Responsible Budget for Sustainable Future*." At the outset, I wish to congratulate the honourable Minister for Finance, Commerce, and Business Development, the honourable Esrom Emmanuel and his team, for presenting a Budget that reflects the Government's commitment to responsible financial management, economic resilience and investment in the future of our people.

The theme is more than a slogan. It reflects a government that is making responsible decisions today, to secure a stronger tomorrow for every Fijian. A responsible Budget is not only about managing figures on paper. It is about making choices that improve lives, strengthen our economy and create opportunities for future generations. Budgets are often measured by numbers, millions of dollars allocated, percentage increases, revenue projections and fiscal targets. But to ordinary Fijians, the true measure of a budget is much simpler.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget responds to those questions. It is a Budget that recognises that economic growth must benefit all Fijians - not only those living in urban centres, but also for rural communities, our maritime islands and for our informal settlements. It is a Budget that places people at the centre of national development.

For the parents struggling to provide for their children, the question is simple - will this Budget create a better future for my family? For our farmers and rural communities - will Government support help them increase production and improve their livelihoods? For our young people - will there be opportunities, jobs and hope for the future? For our elderly and vulnerable citizens - will they receive the support and protection they deserve? And for our businesses - is Government creating an environment where confidence, investment and growth can flourish?

A Responsible Budget: Around the world, governments continue to grapple with rising inflation, geopolitical instability and disruptions to global supply chains. Despite this challenge, Government has chosen a balanced and responsible approach, rather than shifting the burden to ordinary Fijians through higher taxes, this Budget protects households by maintaining VAT at 12.5 percent and retaining a zero-rated VAT on 22 essential items.

At the same time, Government has demonstrated leadership by reducing operational expenditure across ministries and implementing a 20 percent reduction in ministers' salaries. These are not symbolic measures. They demonstrate that Government is prepared to share the burden by protecting families and businesses from unnecessary financial hardship.

Although the Budget projects a fiscal deficit of 7 percent of GDP, this Government has maintained investment in essential services and social protection, while exercising fiscal discipline. This is what a responsible budget looks like.

On the Attorney-General's Portfolio, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Attorney-General's Chambers is responsible for ensuring that the Government continues to operate within the framework of the Constitution, uphold the rule of law and provide sound legal advice across Government. For the 2026-2027 financial year, the Office of the Attorney-General has been allocated $9.8 million, which is a $3 million increase. This investment reflects the growing demand for legal service across Government.

The allocation supports the core functions of the Office, including:

- providing legal advice to Government ministries, departments, and public office;
- representing the state and legal proceedings before courts and tribunals;
- drafting, reviewing and publishing legislation;
- supporting Fiji's participation in regional and international forums;
- administering important regulatory functions including legal liquor licensing, film censorship, legal, education and intellectual property matters; and
- maintaining Fiji's online legal database to ensure laws remain accessible to the public.

The Attorney-General's Office continues to experience an increasing demand for legal advisory services across Government. Last year, the Office prepared 705 legal opinions, conducted 39 independent legal assessments and vetted 1,854 MOUs, MOAs and Cabinet papers. In the current financial year, the Office has already prepared 282 legal opinions, completed 14 independent legal assessments and vetted 1,709 MOUs, MOAs, and Cabinet Papers.

The Office currently has 1,304 active litigation files covering a wide range of complex areas of law. This reflects the critical role the Office plays in ensuring that Government decisions, contracts and policies are legally robust and compliant with the law. These responsibilities continue to be undertaken by a dedicated team of just 25 lawyers who work tirelessly to safeguard Government's legal interest.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a critical function of the Office of the Attorney-General is supporting the Government's Legislative Programme by ensuring that policy decisions and reform priorities are developed into sound and effective laws. This responsibility is undertaken by the Legislative Drafting Section, a specialised team of 10 lawyers who worked diligently behind the scenes to draft legislation, review amendments and provide the legal foundation for Government reforms brought before this honourable House. We are grateful to the Vuvale Partnership for providing a consultant legal drafter to support this section.

Since taking office, the People's Coalition Government has demonstrated strong legislative momentum. Across all sittings of Parliament, from 2023 to date, the Government has tabled a total of 95 Bills of which 82 have been enacted into law. This represents an enactment rate of approximately 86 percent.

The Coalition Government introduced and expanded several policies and programmes that it has described as supporting the social, cultural, institutional and economic development of the *iTaukei* community. Some of the key initiatives include the re-establishment and strengthening of the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC). The GCC was formally disestablished in 2012 by decree.

In 2023, we enacted the Media Industry Development (Repeal) Act 2023. In 2024, we introduced the Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service (Budget Amendment) 2024, the Fiji Truth and Reconciliation Commission was enacted in 2024. In 2026, the Criminal Records Act, Tourism Act, Immigration (Amendment) Act, Passport (Amendment) Act, Citizenship of Fiji (Amendment) Act and Mahogany Act were enacted. More to follow in the months to come.

On Key Achievements, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this financial year has been one of the most significant in the Office's history. In a Parliamentary deadlock - a Constitutional Amendment fell short by one vote in March 2025. To break the legal standstill, the Cabinet asked the Supreme Court for a definitive ruling. Senior Counsel Bret Walker SC was supported by Solicitor-General's Office in this court application. After a week of intense hearings in August, the Court delivered a landmark opinion at the end of the month. The Judges affirmed that the 2013 Constitution remains the law of the land, but they threw a practical lifeline into the mix. They argued that the current rules of change were so impossibly strict that they made the document virtually unamenable. By softening this rigid threshold, the Court has now officially cleared the path for the country to have a direct say through the national referendum.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am reminded of your ruling on 5th March in terms of the objections from the other side into the amendments and the suspension of the Standing Order. Your ruling was supported by the Supreme Court. Following the court ruling, the Solicitor-General's Office drafted and tabled the National Referendum Bill for the Government in December 2025 - a historic first for Fiji, as it creates the actual rules for running a national vote under the current Constitution. Rather than rushing it through, Parliament sent the Bill to a specialist committee for a thorough review. This means, everyday Fijians, including academics and community groups, get a formal chance to have their voices heard before any final decisions are made. The final debate and vote is expected sometime soon, which will effectively set the stage for the general election currently pencilled in for mid of this year and early 2027.

Another proud achievement was Fiji's successful hosting of the 2026 Commonwealth Law Ministers' Meeting (CLMM), where150 of the world's top legal minds attended the CLMM, including Attorney-Generals and Justice Ministers from 56 countries, flying all the way to Nadi to listen to what we have to say. For the first time ever, this major meeting happened in the South Pacific, and Fiji chaired it.

On Boards and Committees, Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me now to provide clarification on the allocation and utilisation of funds for the Boards and Committees under the Office of the Attorney-General, namely, the Central Liquor Board, Hotel Licensing Board and the Board of Legal Education. For this financial year, the Boards and Committees were allocated a sum of $28,125 to support its functions and operational requirements.

On Fiji Intellectual Property Office (FIPO), FIPO plays an important role in supporting innovation, creativity and economic development for protecting intellectual property rights in Fiji. For the new financial year there were 759 new registrations, 1,067 endorsements and 11 patents.

On Legal Aid Commission, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a justice system that can only be truly effective when justice is accessible to everyone, regardless of their financial circumstances. It is within this context that I acknowledge the critical work of the Legal Aid Commission, an institution that continues to bridge the gap between the justice system and vulnerable members of society. This year, the Legal Aid Commission celebrates 30 years of dedicated service to the people of Fiji. For three decades, the Commission has played an essential role in supporting the administration of justice and strengthening the rule of law.

For this financial year, the Commission was allocated $12.1 million. This is a 2.3 percent increase. Through this investment, the Legal Aid Commission has maintained a workforce of 122 lawyers who continue to provide services throughout Fiji, including rural and remote communities. The Commission managed approximately 24,308 active court matters, provided approximately 9,578 legal advice services, and completed more than 16,000 attestations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Commission also continues to support vulnerable members of society, including 853 child-related matters. A significant increase in Domestic Violence Restraining Order cases, with 715 cases recorded during the year, compared to 387 cases in the previous financial year. During the year, more than 9,300 students across 38 schools were reached through awareness programmes, and more than 2,500 community members nationwide participated in legal awareness activities. The Commission's First Hour Procedure, which operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week, also provided assistance to almost 5,000 individuals during the year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the work of the Legal Aid Commission represents the Government's commitment that justice must not depend on wealth. It ensures that every Fijian has a fair opportunity to be heard and protected under the law

On the Fiji Law Reform Commission, Mr. Speaker, Sir, laws must evolve alongside society. A legal framework must remain relevant, practical, responsive to changing social, economic, and technological realities. This is why the work of the Fiji Law Reform Commission is important in strengthening governance and ensuring that Fiji's laws continue to serve the needs of our people.

For the financial year, the Government allocated $678,004 to support the Commission's work in reviewing and modernising Fiji's laws. The true value of these investments is reflected in the outcomes delivered. The Commission undertook extensive consultation with communities, Provincial Councils, government agencies, civil societies, private sector organisations, industry stakeholders, and landowning units, ensuring that the voices of Fijians is considered in the law reform process.

A significant achievement was the completion of the reviews of the Land Use Act 2010 and the State Land Act 1945, with final reports, draft Bills and Regulations submitted and subsequently approved by the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Legislation.

The Commission also progressed reviews on key legislation, including the Online Safety Act 2018, Mining Act 1965, Quarries Act 1939, Liquor Act 2006, Security Industries Act 2010, human trafficking-related laws, agriculture legislation, and court rules. The Commission currently has nine active law reform reviews underway for 2026-2027, with a further six reviews scheduled to commence from August 2026. It demonstrates the Governments continued commitment to the strengthening Fiji’s Legal Framework.

The Commission's work has already resulted in tangible legislative outcomes, including the completion of the review of three migration laws, which resulted in the three Bills being passed, as well as the passage of the Education Bill arising from the review of the Education Act. These achievements, demonstrates Government's investment in law reform and delivering practical results, creating laws that are modern, effective, and reflective of the needs and aspirations of the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, public confidence in Government is built upon the principles of integrity, transparency and accountability. In the 2025-2026 National Budget, the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FIFAC) was allocated $10.5 million to strengthen its anti-corruption operations and implement its Strategic Plan for 2025-2030.

I also welcome the recent advertisement of the Judicial Services Commission for the position of FICAC Commissioner. This important step ensures the Commission continues to operate with strong, independent leadership in accordance with the law. It also reflects Government's commitment to maintaining the integrity of our institutions, and ensuring that key constitutional offices are filled through an open and transparent process.

On Fiji Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission, the protection of human rights remains fundamental in building an inclusive and sustainable Fiji. The Fiji Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission (FHRADC) continues to play an important role in promoting awareness and addressing discrimination, ensuring that the rights and dignity of all Fijians are protected.

During the 2025-2026 financial year, the FHRADC requested an allocation of $6.5 million to resolve critical staffing shortages and upgrade its operational capacity. The Commission strengthened its operations through an internal restructuring, increasing its staff capacity from 11 to 16 Officers, and establishing permanent managerial positions across key areas, including legal and policy, corporate service, education and advocacy, complaints and investigation, and communication.

On the Constitutional Review Commission and public participation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have listened carefully to the comments raised by the honourable Ketan Lal and the honourable Semi Koroilavesau regarding the expenditure allocated towards the Constitutional Review Commission.

If I may respectfully say to the honourable Members before questioning the value of this process, I encourage them to take the time to read the regular updates published by the Constitutional Review Commission through its official platforms, including the stories, photographs and videos documenting the nationwide consultation. These records clearly demonstrate the extensive work undertaken by the Commission and, more importantly, the voices and concerns being raised directly by ordinary citizens. This was never intended to be a process confined to Suva, or the comfort of conference rooms in urban centres. The Commission travelled across all 14 Provinces, including our maritime islands, rural communities, villages and settlements.

We made a commitment to undertake constitutional reform. The People's Coalition Government went to the people of Fiji with a clear promise - that we would review the 2013 Constitution and provide Fijians the opportunity to have their voices heard on the document that governs them. One of the strongest and most consistent messages received during these consultations was the perception among many Fijians that the 2013 Constitution came through the back door and was imposed upon them without genuine consultation or participation.

Many told the Commission that they felt they were never given the opportunity to contribute to the Constitution that became the supreme law of their country. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government could have chosen the same approach. We could have sat behind closed doors, prepared amendments ourselves and simply presented them to the people. We could have taken the easy political path. But what would democracy mean if that was our approach?

Democracy is not simply about holding elections every four years. It is about respecting the people and their voices. It is about consultation. It is about ensuring citizens have a meaningful opportunity to participate in decisions that shape their future. Unlike the process in 2013, this Government has chosen a different path. Meaningful democracy requires investment. Consultation requires people, transport, logistics, public awareness and resources. Democracy is not free, but the cost of listening to our people is far less than the cost of excluding them from decisions that will affect generations to come.

On Ministry of Justice, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to highlight the important investment being made across our justice institutions, as already articulated by the Assistant Minister. The Ministry of Justice and its strategic priorities for the 2026-2027 financial year. A sustainable future for Fiji cannot be achieved through economic development alone. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it requires strong institutions, effective justice systems, accountable governance and public confidence that laws are administered fairly, efficiently, and without fear of favour.

The Ministry of Justice plays an important role in supporting Fiji's justice architecture. It supports key areas including justice sector reforms, legislative implementation, rehabilitation initiatives, institutional strengthening and programmes that will improve access to justice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I could just conclude. The Fiji Corrections Services (FCS) also plays a critical role in this regard. They are allocated $64.7 million and this represents the budget and the approaches administered by the Acting Commissioner. The administration is to ensure that true rehabilitation is actuated to the inmates, and they are fully integrated back into the community when they are released. The Ministry and the Government is fully supportive of the positive work being done by the Fiji Corrections Services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the time limitations, we fully support the Budget and the good governance, accountability and the utilisation of the public resources that will ensure that every Fijian enjoys from the programmes of this Government. I fully endorse the Budget.

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and all citizens of Fiji joining us through television, radio and online platforms. *Miau sa bula re,* and a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our *Holy Bible* reminds us in Proverbs 21:5: “The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty.” This timeless wisdom reminds us that the nation's future is built not by chance, but through careful planning, prudent investment and steadfast commitment to the wellbeing of the people of Fiji.

I rise in support of the 2026-2027 National Budget, and I am pleased to contribute to this debate on behalf of the Ministry of Education. I acknowledge the Ministry of Finance for presenting a budget that continues to recognise education as one of the Government's highest priorities while balancing the competing demands on our nation’s resources.

The Government has made a significant investment in education. The task before us is to use those resources wisely, support our schools, and deliver the improvement that parents, students and communities rightfully expect from the Government. The Government has continued to reduce the financial barriers that once prevented many children from attending school through free education, student transport assistance, tertiary scholarships and other support programmes where families are receiving assistance to keep their children in education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as access continues to improve, our attention must now turn to keeping children engaged in school, supporting them to complete their education and ensuring that they leave with the knowledge, skills and values needed for employment, further education, and responsible citizenship.

Regular school attendance remains one of the strongest foundations for educational success. A child who attends school consistently, has a far better opportunity to learn, develop confidence and achieve his or her potential. While Government has reduced many of the financial barriers to education, we know that attendance and school completion are influenced by many other factors. Family circumstances, peer pressure, student behaviour, social issues and a loss of interest in learning can all affect whether the child remains in school.

This is why school cannot work in isolation. Parents and guardians have the first responsibility for encouraging regular attendance and reinforcing the importance of education at home. Communities, faith-based organisations and other partners also have important roles in supporting our young people. Every child who leaves school early represents a missed opportunity. Keeping children engaged in learning should remain one of our highest priorities, because completing school gives young people greater choices for further education, skills training and also having employment in their future career undertaking.

Education today is very different from what it was only a few years ago. Our schools are preparing students for a world that is changing rapidly, where technology, new industries and changing patterns of employment are reshaping the skills that young people will need. At the same time, schools continue to face challenges that extend beyond academic learning. Student wellbeing, behaviour, online safety and other social issues increasingly influence attendance, engagement and also their achievements at school.

These realities require us to continually review how we support our schools, teachers and students. They also remind us that funding, by itself, will not improve education. Progress depends on how well our policies are implemented, how effectively our schools are supported and whether our students are achieving better results.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the public rightly expects to see results from Government's investments in education. Parents want confidence that their children are learning. Teachers want the support needed to do their jobs well. Employers want young people leaving school with knowledge, skills and attitudes needed in today's workplace. Those expectations are reasonable, and they should continue to guide the work of the Ministry.

Throughout this debate, I wish to focus on the areas where continued attention will make the greatest difference. Supporting our teachers, preparing our students for employment, strengthening digital learning, improving student wellbeing and ensuring that every investment contributes to better outcomes across our education system.

Every education system depends on its teachers. They influence how students learn, grow, and prepare for life beyond the classroom. I acknowledge the commitment of our teachers, Heads of schools, and school support staff, who continue to serve with professionalism, often in circumstances that require personal sacrifice, particularly in our rural, remote, and maritime communities. The Government has continued to support the teaching profession through this Budget. Our focus should now be on attracting qualified teachers, retaining experienced teachers, and ensuring that schools have the right teachers where they are needed most.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, professional development should remain a priority. As curriculum, technology, and classroom practises continue to evolve, teachers must be given every opportunity to strengthen their knowledge and skills. We should also continue listening to our teachers. They understand the realities of the classroom, and their experience should continue to inform the Ministry's decisions.

Education should prepare young people for the opportunities that await them after they leave school. The National Skills Gap Assessment Survey, launched earlier this year, highlighted the growing demand for skilled workers across key sectors of our economy. From Year 9, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) equip students with practical skills and career pathways for further training, employment, or establishing their own businesses. These schemes, such as the Viti Skills Fair, showcase students' talents, encourage innovation, and strengthen partnerships between schools and industry.

The Ministry's ongoing curriculum review provides an important opportunity to keep learning relevant and responsive to the needs of our students and our country. The curriculum should continue to strengthen literacy and numeracy, encourage critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving and support the values that help young people become a responsible citizen in their lifelong learnings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, technology has become an important part of teaching and for learning across our schools. For the first time, this Budget has provided dedicated funding for digital learning, including investments in Moodle, internet connectivity, digital equity, teacher workshops, and the School Broadcast Programme. These initiatives will strengthen access to learning resources, support teachers in the classroom, and help ensure that students across Fiji benefit from technology-enabled learning while developing the digital skills needed for the future.

Creating safe and supportive learning environments remains an important responsibility for every school. Students learn best when they feel secure, respected, and supported. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the commitment of our school chaplains and counsellors. Together with our teachers and Heads of schools, they provide guidance and encouragement that helps young people develop good values, self-discipline and a sense of responsibility.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome the dedicated allocation of $100,000 for the Matua Programme in this Budget. Many students leave school because of financial hardship, family responsibilities, health issues, pregnancy, and other personal circumstances. The Matua Programme provides them with the opportunity to complete their secondary education and continue their learning.

Over the years, the Programme has enabled many former school leavers and adult learners to return to school and progress to tertiary education, professional qualifications, skills training and employment. These achievements demonstrate the value of providing flexible pathways for those who wish to complete their education. This Budget reinforces the Government's commitment to expanding opportunities for lifelong learning. The Ministry will continue working with schools and educational partners to encourage more eligible learners to take advantage of the Matua Programme and complete their education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome the transfer of the $40 million Back-to-School Support Programme to the Ministry of Education's budget. This reflects the Government's decision to place the administration of the Programme within the Ministry responsible for delivering education services in our beloved country.

In previous years, the Ministry verified applications submitted by the Heads of schools before payments were administered through the Ministry of Finance. From the next academic year, the Ministry of Education will administer the Programme, providing a clearer oversight, more responsive service delivery and greater accountability in the management of these funds.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, education succeeds when Government, schools, parents, families, and communities each play their roles. The responsibility of preparing our young people for the future belongs to all of us.

I acknowledge our teachers, heads of schools, school management committees, controlling authorities, parents, and everyone who continues to support education throughout Fiji. Your contribution is sincerely appreciated.

To the students of Fiji, work hard, value your education and make the most of the opportunities before you. The knowledge and skills you gain today will help to shape the choices you make tomorrow. I commend the honourable Minister for Finance for this Budget, and I reaffirm my support for the continued work of the Ministry of Education in serving the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to respond to honourable Maharaj, who stated yesterday that we are doing less on drugs and HIV, and let me correct the honourable member on the following: from 2023 to 2026, the Coalition Government has introduced a range of initiatives to address Fiji's growing challenges with illicit drugs and HIV. Many of these measures recognise that the two issues are increasingly linked, particularly through injecting drug use. Officials have emphasised that reinforcement is not sufficient, that a coordinated public health and community response is also needed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, establishing the Ministry of Policing in 2025 to provide a dedicated leadership on policing, crime prevention and public safety. It also established the Counter Narcotic Bureau to coordinate intelligence, investigation, border enforcement, and inter-agency operations against drugs and trafficking. It also adopted Fiji's first National Counter Narcotic Strategy 2023-2028. The focus is on supply reduction, demand reduction, harm reduction, legislative reform, strengthening border and law enforcement efforts to intercept illicit drugs and dismantle trafficking networks.

Also, it promotes a whole-of-nation approach involving traditional leaders, the church, the schools, civil society organisations, communities and the private sector. It also expanded drug awareness and prevention programmes targeting schools and the communities. It planned a rehabilitation and treatment initiative, including proposals for additional rehabilitation centres and the rapid approach for people affected by drugs dependent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government declared the HIV and AIDS a national outbreak and launched an emergency response through the Ministry of Health. Implementation of the HIV Surge Strategic Plan 2024-2027 to expand preventative testing, treatment, and healthy system capacity. It also launched a national HIV Outbreak Response Plan to accelerate immediate intervention in communities with higher transmissions. It increased Government funding for HIV responses, alongside support from international partners.

Expanded HIV testing and treatment services, including efforts to improve medicinal supply chains and treatment access. It also improved access to inter-clinical therapies, including multi-month dispensing and delivery to remote communities. Work with international partners such as the World Health Organisation, UNAID, UNDP, UNFPA, and the Global Fund to strengthen HIV responses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, developing harm reduction measures in response to HIV transmission linked to injecting of drug use include planning for the Needle Syringe Programme (NSP) with assistance from international public health guidance. The Coalition Government has also recognised the connection between methamphetamine use, injecting drug use, and the risk of high HIV infection.

The Coalition Government has increasingly presented these inter-connected challenges with strategies combined. Stronger law enforcement against drug trafficking, preventative and public education, community partnership, expanded health services and HIV treatment, and harm reduction methods for people at risk.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while these initiatives represent significant policy actions, we continue to face serious challenges from both illicit drugs and HIV. The long-term effectiveness of these measures will depend on implementation, sustained funding, cooperation across sectors, and continued community engagement. I urge the honourable Members that all information brought before this House should be based on facts and not misleading the people of Fiji.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the 2026-2027 National Budget, and I commend it to this honourable House. *Vinaka saka vakalevu* for the opportunity.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 11.04 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.31 a.m.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and the people of Fiji; *bula vinaka* and a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the 2026-2027 National Budget. In doing so, I wish first to express my sincere appreciation to the Minister for Finance, Commerce, Business and Development, the Permanent Secretary of Finance and all Officials who have worked tirelessly to prepare this Budget. Every budget reflects the values and priorities of a Government. This Budget shows a commitment to careful financial management, while ensuring that no community is left behind. It also recognises that lasting national development begins with strong families, strong villages and empowered resource owners.

The theme of this year's Budget "*A Responsible Budget for Sustainable Future*" reflects the conditions under which this Budget was prepared. A difficult global and national financial environment marked with slow growth, pressure on Government revenues and change in global fuel prices. It is a Budget that has had to balance careful spending with delivery. I commend the Ministry of Finance for the sound judgment that is required.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a responsible and realistic Budget that protects essential services, supports economic and maintains the Government commitment to careful financial management. The 2026-2027 Budget provides a total expenditure of approximately $4.87 billion while continuing to invest in national infrastructure, productive sectors and essential public services. At the same time, the Government remains committed to supporting private sector growth, encouraging investment and removing unnecessary barriers to doing business.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also recognise the financial challenge before us. Estimated revenue for the 2026-2027 Budget is $3.82 billion, with a projected deficit of approximately $1 billion. These are significant challenges, but they also show the importance of careful delivery, sound financial management and ensuring that every public dollar delivers clear value for the people of Fiji.

Our vision is clear - to build stronger villages, stronger provincial institutions, productive landowners and confident young people who can succeed in Fiji's modern economy, while preserving our identity and culture. Rather than cover every part of the budget, I wish to highlight several major national allocations that will bring direct and lasting benefits to *iTaukei* families, villages and provincial communities.

To strengthen healthcare services, facilities and medical infrastructure, the Government has allocated $477 million to the Ministry of Health. This investment will improve access to quality healthcare for our rural, maritime and provincial communities.

To expand support for learners and young people, the Ministry of Education has been allocated $708.3 million, including funding for free education, transport assistance, Back-to-School assistance and higher education institutions. This investment will expand education opportunities and support our Ministry's own investment in technical and vocational training through the Centre for Appropriate Technology & Development (CATD) at Nadave.

To improve roads and access in rural areas, approximately $370 million has been allocated to the Fiji Road's Authority for road maintenance, bridge replacement and rural road upgrades. Better transport infrastructure improves access to markets, schools, health services and economic opportunities for our communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to improve water supply, treatment and wastewater services, the Water Authority of Fiji has been allocated $291 million. Reliable water and sanitation are essential for healthier, safer and stronger communities.

To continue supporting vulnerable families, older persons, children and persons with disabilities, the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection has been allocated $211 million. This investment shows Government's commitment to protecting those most in need.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in agriculture and natural resources, I also acknowledge the continued investment in agriculture, forestry, fisheries, rural development and waterways. These sectors remain the backbone of many *iTaukei* livelihood, supporting food security, jobs, responsible management of resources and economic growth for our resource-owning communities.

Over the past four years, the Ministry has moved from restoration to transformation. The Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) was restored. The *Vale ni Bose* was rebuilt and reopened, and consultations were conducted across all 14 Provinces and Rotuma. Traditional governance was strengthened through chiefly title confirmations, provincial and *tikina* meetings, leadership training, and review of the wider iTaukei administration. Integrated village development plans were completed for all the 1,173 villages, while 190 village projects worth more than $4.2 million, improved sanitation, community infrastructure, and village development.

The iTaukei Affairs Board also supported 24 businesses, secured market access for seven businesses and delivered 108 financial literacy and business guidance sessions across 30 communities. Economic empowerment was strengthened through the iTaukei Wealth Fund, resource owners' development projects, and interest support that helped unlock $25.7 million in approved lending.

The Qele Maroroi Holdings was launched to increase landowners' participation in commercial development, while the iTaukei Plaza 1, iTaukei Plaza 2, and FHL Tower demonstrate the growing strength of Indigenous investment. The TLTB Education Scholarship Framework was also rolled out, creating new education and skilled pathways for iTaukei students.

Cabinet also approved the pathway for CATD Nadave to develop as a business support centre for resource owners' businesses, linking technical training with business development. The iTaukei Land and Fisheries Commission digitised 164 VKB records, while expanding land survey, village mapping, boundary marking, and ownership confirmation.

The iTLTB approved 2,834 new leases, covering 14,919 hectares, generating $1.95 million in annual rental income and $49.1 million in lease premiums, while reducing lease arrears to 30 percent. CATD Nadave expanded training, technical training, completed a new classroom block in dormitories for approximately 80 students, introduced additional trade programmes, and in 2024-225 recorded 194 graduates to a reported 90 percent graduate employment rate.

Environment protection was also strengthened through the confirmation of 118 traditional *tabu* sites, covering approximately 209 square kilometres of community-managed marine areas. On indigenous rights, consultations on UNDRIP were completed, endorsed by the GCC and the iTaukei Affairs Board, and included in the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Bill, which has progressed to parliamentary consultation.

The Ministry also progressed the Traditional Knowledge and Culture Expression Bill, the review of the *iTaukei* administration, the GCC, TLFC, and TLTB legislation. The Ministry also extended its service to Fijians living overseas, directly assisting more than 1,500 Fijians in the United

Kingdom with VKB, land services, investment and cultural services. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a record of institutions restored, indigenous rights advanced, villages strengthened customary records protected, landowners' empowerment, young people trained, and Fiji's cultural heritage protected. Much remains to be done. However, the foundation is stronger, the direction is clearer and the iTaukei voice has been firmly returned to the centre of national development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, having outlined the wide national investment that benefits our people, as well as the Ministry records of delivery over the past four years, I now return to the programme funding and grants that will continue this work in the 2026-2027 budget. The Ministry has been allocated $33.1 million. This allocation will strengthen the provincial administration, village and traditional governance, resource owners' development, technical training, village infrastructure, institutional reform, national initiatives that protect iTaukei identity, and advance active participation in Fiji's development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will now explain how these major programs and grants will support the work of the Ministry and its institutions. To support the work of the provincial council, the 14 Provincial Councils receive a total grant of $7.1 million. Provincial Councils remain the main link between Government, traditional leaders and communities across Fiji. This grant will support provincial administration, the planning and delivery of development priorities, stronger reporting and accountability, and closer link between villages, *tikina*, provincial and the national planning.

To carry out this national governance, coordination and service responsibility, the iTaukei Affairs Board will receive a grant of $3.2 million. The Board will continue to support the provincial councils, oversee the delivery of village and provincial development plans, strengthen economic and community programs, and coordinate conservation, urban outreach, and other initiatives affecting the iTaukei community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to support the service of our traditional and community leaders, a total of $4.2 million is provided. This includes $2.8 million for Turaga ni Koro, $585,000 for Mata ni Tikina, and $0.8 million under the Vanua Leadership allowance. Everyday, these leaders carry responsibilities for the community administration, social order, public health, disaster communication, village development, cultural protocol and coordination of Government programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to support the iTaukei resource owners, the Budget provides $3.8 million for the iTaukei Resource Owners Support and Development Fund, making it one of the Ministry's main economic support programmes. Under this arrangement, Government pays the interest cost on approved loans for the first three years. This reduced the initial payment burden while approved resource owners' projects are established.

The Fund will assist landowning units and provincial holding companies to prepare and progress sound, workable projects that make better economic use of Fiji iTaukei land and natural resources. Support will include land subdivisions, commercial land tourism development, agriculture, agro-business, forestry and fisheries-related business and the professional and technical work needed to make projects ready for financing and are able to last.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on CATD Nadave, the Budget provides an operating grant of $920,000 and a capital grant of $2 million, giving a combined allocation of $2.9 million. The capital grant will support the expansion of Nadave Campus and additional classrooms, workshops, dormitories and related facilities. The wider grant will support practical, technical and vocational training, apprenticeship, employment pathways, business development and CATD’s growing role as a business support centre for resource-owner businesses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at village level, the Village Improvement Scheme has been allocated $1.3

million to continue practical investment in village infrastructure and community facilities. The programme will support sanitation, water supply improvement, footpaths drainage, solar lighting, community facilities, village beautifications and other small projects that improve health, safety and resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allocations are not simply stand-alone figures; they are the next stage of four years' delivery records outlined earlier in this speech. Together, Provincial Councils and the iTaukei Affairs Board grant will help turn village and Provincial plans into action. The leadership allowance will support the local leadership network that connects governance with the *vanua.* The Resource Owners Forum will build on the funding model that helps unlock $25.7 million in approved lending, while the CATD grant package will build on expanding facilities, new trade programmes and strong graduate results. In the same way, the Village Improvement Scheme will continue the direct investment that has already delivered projects across our community.

We have recognised the important roles of Fijian Holdings Ltd, iTLTB, our Provincial Councils, iTTFB, other institutions and investors in supporting well-planned indigenous businesses and projects in the years ahead. I wish to acknowledge the Permanent Secretary and all staff of the Ministry; the Chairperson, members and Secretariat of the Great Council of Chiefs; the Board, leadership teams, management and staff of the following institutions: the iTaukei Trust Fund Board, the iTaukei Land and Fisheries Commission, Centre for Appropriate Technology and Development, the iTaukei Land Trust Board, Fijian Holdings Limited and our Provincial Councils. I also acknowledge our Turaga ni Koro, Mata ni Tikina and Turaga ni Yavusa, together with our landowning units, community representatives, women's and youth groups and our value development partners.

A successful delivery of a budget depends on officers and community leaders serving throughout the province, maritime areas and remote communities. This Budget recognises that the strength of the *iTaukei* people rests not only in land and institutions inherited from our ancestors, but also in our ability to use this foundation wisely to create opportunities for future generations. By strengthening traditional institutions, making productive use of our resources, investing in our young people, and continuing to improve our villages, we seek to build communities that remain firmly rooted in their identity, participating confidently in Fiji's modern economy. The Government remains committed to the advancement of indigenous people with a united and prosperous Fiji. Our ancestors entrust us with our land, our culture, and our institutions. It is now our responsibility to ensure that these foundations create opportunities rather than become obstacles to progress.

This Budget allows us to honour this responsibility. It invests not only in programmes and projects, but in the future of our *iTaukei* people and our beloved Fiji. With those remarks, I fully support the 2026-2027 National Budget.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Members of Parliament and the people of Fiji listening in this morning.

I would like to start off, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by congratulating my colleague, the honourable Minister for Finance, for the tabling of his first budget, following on the three budgets that were tabled by his predecessor, who is also a very good friend, the honourable Professor Prasad.

I also take the time to thank all of those who have played a part in developing the budget, including those who offered their submissions, various Cabinet subcommittees, in particular the technocrats, led by the Permanent Secretary of Finance and his whole team, who have developed the budget that we have for us this year.

I also appreciate also those who took the time to come and brief the Opposition Chambers, the Opposition Caucus on the budget, this includes the Ministry of Finance, Investment Fiji, Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS) and Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation (FCEF). All of this has contributed in helping the Opposition to carry out its important role in this budget debate. There are a few good points about this budget that I want to highlight. First of all, I would like to express my appreciation for this year's Budget Supplement Booklet, which provides a very transparent and candid analysis of the issues that we currently face. It also highlights the good, the bad and the challenges that lie ahead of us, and I thank them for preparing that booklet.

The Budget captures some of the key issues that need to be recognised. It recognised the need for fiscal discipline that needs to be put in place. The Minister acknowledges that we cannot continue to finance over-expanding expenditure by borrowing, which is something that I think a lot of people have talked about in this debate. The theme for this budget is, "*A Responsible Budget for Sustainable Future*". Responsibility means having a duty to deal with or control something or having the gumption to take the blame if necessary and doing the right thing to fix it. A sustainable future is one where we meet the present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to also thrive.

A responsible budget is one that meets the needs of the country to build a better quality of life for all. It means being better prepared to admit faults and build in measures to address problems and challenges. A responsible budget is one that does what is right, necessary and in the best interest of this nation. The Budget tries to do some of that; however, it does not go far enough. It tries to be responsible; however, it is not responsible enough and tries to be the catalyst for a sustainable future, but it does not do so.

We are all aware of the multitude of challenges that we face in Fiji right now. The oil price crisis, which has led to heightened cost of living, energy costs, freight costs, fertiliser cost, et cetera. A crisis that has happened because of a reaction of Iran to the actions of the USA in Israel. We are also aware of the needs of our vulnerable people, the drug crisis, the health crisis that incorporates HIV, AIDS, and NCDs, and mental health amongst a whole host of others.

Ever since independence, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we as a nation have had deficit budgets. The only year that I can see that we had a surplus in this budget supplement booklet that we have was in 2008 under the Bainimarama government, where they had a surplus of $28 million. The deficits are therefore nothing new. However, the critical issue is trying to manage those deficits and trying to address the issues that lead to the deficit in the first place.

In his speech to Parliament on the 2023-2024 Budget, honourable Professor Prasad stated that they at that time needed to find a staggering $1billion to serve the debt. They had about $536 million to service the debt, and they also needed $536 million for another $560 million for payment of the principal. In other words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, he said one out of every four dollars in that budget now is spent on servicing the Government budget.

Well, Mr. Speaker, Sir, under this so-called responsible budget, the Government will have a gross deficit of $1.481 billion more, which is a definite increase. Government now has to borrow $1.481 billion to pay that deficit. It also has to pay $436 million for the existing debt and another figure in Head 52 of $ 571 million to pay the interest payments. All of that has increased. So if that was a staggering debt, I do not know what this is. Maybe this is an exceedingly staggering debt, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This is coming in a time where revenue for Government is declining from the current financial year to the new one. Revenue declining, debts are increasing. That is our situation.

We now have to keep borrowing at this level just to keep the expenditure level the same. We have to do this for a long time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because revenue will not catch up. Under the current climate, it will not catch up. That means we just have to keep on going down this path. We will find it harder and harder to continually refinance this level of debt in order to get budget support to cushion the effects of this, we will need to put in place reforms which are a pre-requisite to getting that kind of budget support and there is very little space for us to do that. There is, in fact, very little physical space. There is, in fact, Sir, there is no physical space. This is the crisis. This is the crisis that is here right now. That is the crisis. People are saying there is no crisis. This is the crisis. It is a crisis of how we are going to manage our future.

Government has to face the fact that expenditure has risen too fast. Much too fast. This Government raised debt to increase revenue. This, of course, brought hardships on a lot of our people. We have talked about that at great length and they did not use that money to pay off their debts, as they said, but they began to increase expenditure.

Revenue has now reduced from 2024. Expenditure is still increasing. Expenditure is still increasing. The nature of our expenditure is a major concern, Sir. $4 billion out of our $4.8 billion is operational expenditure. Operational - money that does not lead to growth. A lot of it is necessary. A lot of it is unnecessary. That is the elephant in the room. We need to find that unnecessary expenditure and get rid of it so that we can grow as a country. This needs to be reviewed, and this has been the suggestion from our side constantly during this Budget debate.

One of these is the size of Government. Almost all of you in Government is either a Minister or an Assistant Minister. That is unheard of in the world - totally unheard of. It is only necessary if the people who are Ministers cannot do their jobs and they have to give their little portfolios and hand it out to other people. That is the only reason it began. The size of Government is bloated. Ministers, Assistant Ministers, tripping over each other's feet, not knowing what to do. Walking around, wandering around like headless chickens a lot of the time, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Offices, staff, teams, all of these are such an excessive, bloated Cabinet. I cannot deal with it. Maybe have some more Ministers now, might be ministers for flowers and footpaths and window decorating or whatnot.

On the use of Government vehicles - the need to control the way that Government vehicles are used. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to also look also at social spending which is very important. There is a need for transfers for people that need it, but we need to manage it better because it keeps growing and growing. If your revenue is not catching up, we are digging a deeper and deeper hole for us to bury ourselves in.

This is very critical, Mr. Speaker, Sir. To get out of this crisis, there are only two things we can do. One is to grow the economy. That can be done, but it is going to take some time. The other way to do it is to cut expenses. Right now, that is what needs to be done. If not, we will break into a deeper and deeper hole and we are going to drag this whole country with us.

There are a number of other things that I want to speak for briefly in the remaining time that I have. There have been a lot of things that have been talked about here about how we grow the economy. Hon. Koya talked about productivity. There is a whole lot of issues that we need to look at.

I would like to look at the issue of skilled workers, Sir. There is a glaring deficit of skilled workers in this country. There's a lot of money that is in this budget. Trying to look at the education scheme and to get that on track, but we have to address the huge skills gap that we have. The loss of skilled workers. Over 100,000 people have been lost over the years, but right now, we have this big gap, Sir.

We are seeing massive increases in budgets being given for scholarships, but at the same time, we see high youth unemployment. I think the rate of unemployment in Fiji is 5.7 percent. Youth unemployment is above 18 percent. Now, having high youth unemployment is normal in most areas, but to have that and at the same time having high influx of foreign workers coming, there is something that is going wrong. There is something that does not make sense.

I think as part of this budget exercise Governments need to seriously relook at the role that is being undertaken by the Higher Education Commission of Fiji and TSLS. If this money is going, is it going in areas that are addressing the skill gaps? If we are throwing money at the education sector and the skills sector, and the skill gaps are not being met, something is wrong, that needs to be fixed. I appreciate the fact that the money is going into education, but it is not fixing the problem. We have lost so many workers over the years. We need to get that.

I appreciate, for instance, the NTPC levy coming back in to be used for the purpose that it was supposed to be there. That will help companies have money for on-the-job training, train their own employees because you cannot get a 100 percent person able to work in industry that comes straight out of the institute. You cannot. It cannot be done. You have to have that person to learn on the job after his degree and diploma. He has to learn on the job, and that is where that levy comes in. It helps the employees to fund that sort of programme. So, I appreciate the Apprenticeship Programme. It is very essential. I congratulate the Water Authority of Fiji. The honourable Minister said I think they will have 80 apprentices; that is a very good move. I encourage other companies and I also encourage Government if you are going to do Public Works Department (PWD), take on your own apprentices because it used to be a very big source for a lot of workers that we had in this country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to address some of the comments that have been made by some Members of the House over the past few days during the course of this debate. Maybe for this one I need the glasses to make sure I do not say the wrong thing. I refer to my very good friend, Honourable Agni Deo Singh, he mentioned that this was a balanced Budget. He said this is a balanced Budget. This is not a balanced Budget. A balanced Budget means your revenue is more than your expenditure, not less. When your revenue is less than your expenditure, that is a deficit Budget, not a balanced Budget. So, that is the Economic Foundational level. Honourable Charan Jeet Singh, he pulled up the *Fiji Sun* and he said, see, the honourable Leader of Opposition said to cut the Civil Service. I told him you better go and check. Do not believe everything you read in newspapers. Go and read the speech what he actually said...

(Honourable Government Member interjected)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Let me tell you. Let me give you the point. The point that was made by the honourable Leader of the Opposition. Anyone that is responsible for managing the economy take heeds of the words of the Leader of the Opposition. He mentioned this, we have 42,000 workers serving a national population of 937: 47 Civil Servants serving every 100 people. New Zealand has a workforce of 64,000 Civil Servants against a population of 5.36 million; 12 Public Servants serving 1,000 people. Nowhere in the world you have such a bloated Civil Service, and you keep growing it. All around the world, Governments are shrinking, they keep the policy role, the regulatory role and the operational roles they farm out. Our Government is doing the exact opposite. We are doing the exact opposite. Government is getting bigger and bigger and bigger. That is probably why these Ministers are inept, they have so many of them. They do not know what to do. They keep falling over each other's feet.

Honourable Tuisawau, my very good friend. He went at length, you know; this is what he said: debt under the Bainimarama rose from $2.8 billion in 2006 to $9.7 billion in 2022. Very correct.

You did good maths. An increase of $6.9 billion over a period of 14 years. Half a billion increase per year. This Coalition Government, your Coalition Government is increasing debt by $3.4 billion in three years $1.13 billion per year. Facts and figures from your own documents. Facts and figures my friends, *mosi mosi* eh*?*

He also said here that FijiFirst in 2021 had a $1.2 billion deficit compared to the Coalition Government's 2026 - 2027, of $1 billion deficit, which is less. That is the question to ask. Deficits in FijiFirst (well, I am no longer in FijiFfirst – there is no FijiFirst), but since you raised it, I used to be there.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Those people too used to be there. The *laveliga* squad on this side. The deficits in FijiFirst, hey listen, learn. Deficits in FijiFirst ranged from $352 million in 2014 up to $636 million in 2019 before COVID-19, an average of $390 million per year. If you take the period up to COVID-19, the whole Government, the average was - listen very carefully - $580 million per year. Your Coalition Government, your average every year is $649 million. Bite on that. No COVID-19, no 14 cyclones, nothing of that nature.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- That is how you do it.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order! Order. I would ask the honourable Member to please lower the volume.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Since I have only got three minutes left, I would like to stick to time. So, with your guidance, I would like to finish off.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Kamikamica is my very good friend and he is not here. In his speech, he compared the previous government that I was a Member of to say "Nabukalou Creek". He compared us to Nabukalou Creek. He said, "when the tide is high, it looks beautiful. But when the tide goes out, the dirt underneath is exposed".

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is an interesting comparison. After three and a half years in Government, the question is simple. What has the Coalition Government done to clean up Nabukalou Creek? What have you done? It is easy to stand on the riverbank and point at the mud. But leadership is not about blaming those that came before. Leadership is about cleaning it up. Leadership is about taking action, not whining, complaining, and tears falling down your face and whatnot. The honourable Member is quick to list the projects that were delayed or not completed but he conveniently forgets to tell this august House if there was mismanagement. What action did this Government take? Where are the investigations? Where are the accountability measures?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the truth is that many delayed projects were not failures of Government policy. They involved contractors, consultants, project managers and project owners who failed to deliver. But instead of fixing problems, this Government has spent three and a half years holding a blame game. If Nabukalou Creek is the metaphor for the past, then let us ask, has the creek been cleaned, or are they simply waiting for the next high tide so that everything looks good from a distance?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of Fiji did not elect this Government to be commentators on yesterday's problems. They elect them and expect them to deliver solutions today. The tide has been in for three and a half years. The question is, when the tide goes out, what will the Fijians see?

Honourable Kamikamica says, "this is a responsible budget because it is not an election budget". But what is an election budget? It is a budget where our government offers grants, handouts, and debt reliefs, lollipops to win the support of voters.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hold on, hold on *laveliga* squad.

(Laughter)

HON. J. USAMATE.- To do that, however, a Government needs strong revenues and a sufficient fiscal space. This Government has neither. It does not have strong revenues; it does not have the fiscal space. After three and a half years of consumption-driven spending, higher taxes and weak private sector growth, it has boxed itself into a corner.

It simply does not have the fiscal capacity to offer meaningful relief to ordinary Fijians, even if it wanted to. The only people who continue to enjoy the Government's generosity are its own Ministers and Assistant Ministers, with one of the largest Cabinets in Fiji's history. For everyone else, the message is to tighten your belts, and whenever people ask why, the Government points to global fuel prices, wars in the Middle East, or some other external crisis.

In other words, when it comes to looking after itself, the Government also always finds the money. This is not a responsible budget. It is a budget of fiscal exhaustion. After three and a half years in office, the Government has run out of fiscal space, run out of ideas, and now expects ordinary Fijians to pay the price.

It is not a budget that leads to sustainability. It is doing the exact opposite; it is a budget that will make it more difficult for those who follow us because it is not making the tough calls for what expenditure to cut, for reducing the size of OPEC and the size of Government. This is not a sustainable budget; it is a cowardly budget because it does not address the elephant in the room. For those things precisely, Sir, I cannot support this budget.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, honourable Prime Minister, remaining protocol for the House in acknowledgement observed. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the 2026-27 Budget Appropriation Bill before this House.

Let me begin by acknowledging the honourable Minister for Finance and his good team at the Ministry for the hard work that they have done, and they have indeed made tough calls. They have delivered a budget that faces reality rather than fleeing from it. That takes courage, Mr. Speaker, and that deserves our respect.

Mr. Speaker, let us be clear. Budget is not a comfort blanket, it is, in fact, a call to arms. It is an honest declaration of our vulnerabilities. As a large ocean state, because of our dependency to the rest of the globe, we are hit hard when shocks, externally caused, occur. Our resources, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are finite. In this budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are saying that despite the harsh global headwinds, we will not accept a decline as our destiny. We will build, we will transform, and we will do so with our eyes wide open to the world as it is, not as we wish it to be.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, stability is not given, it is earned. It is built through discipline, through difficult choices, and through courage to say no-when yes, would be easier, but irresponsible. This budget delivers that stability. Not through the wishful thinking proposals from the Fijians First, and the One Nation members of Parliament masquerading as independent members of the House.

Through hard numbers, Mr. Speaker, Sir, through prudent and measured measurement, through a Government that understands that fiscal responsibility is not an abstract concept. It is the foundation upon which every other aspiration of ordinary Fijians must be built. We are navigating a fuel crisis that we did not create. When the honourable Minister for Finance delivered the budget on 26th June, 2026, oil price was sitting at USD72 a barrel.

The deal had been signed, and by all projections, it was going to come down much faster. The deal did not last long, rockets started again, and aggression has since surged. When I checked this morning, it was sitting at USD85 a barrel, and likely to close at 87USD a barrel by the end of today - an increase of about FJD30 a barrel from when the budget was announced, and we have not even passed it yet. In the midst of all of this volatility, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this budget and this Government is protecting the most vulnerable among us.

Again, for the whining Fijians First, and the One Nations in the House, on the lack of capital budget, consider there is an additional $1 billion of social wages in the operational. They are destined for Fijians that you say you fight for. There are operational expenses that reduce capital outputs throughout all the ministries. You would have to be extremely deaf not to hear the list that was read out by the honourable Bulitavu on Monday and, again, by the honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Sugar Industry this morning. That, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is leadership in the most uncertain and volatile times.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Lands and Mineral and Resources have been allocated $37.1 million for this financial year. This represents a reduction of approximately $3.5 million, about 10 percent of our previous year's allocation. And we have challenged ourselves to embrace efficiency, to adopt a more strategic-based approach to our programs, to achieve greater results and value for money across all areas of our operation. Because, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in times of constraints, we are forced to ask the most important question: What truly matters?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot control the forces of global waves that buffet our shores. We cannot dictate oil prices. We cannot resolve distant conflicts. We cannot bend the arc of international market to our will. We have heard the Opposition say if you provide relief to the fuel supplies, there will be no flow on effect at the pump and the price of public goods, et cetera. What nonsense. Where in the world has this Middle Eastern energy crisis not caused oil, gas and prices to surge? None. So please, for the sake of the country, keep your economics to yourself, because you are likely to mislead others quite quickly with your hunky-dory economics theory.

This budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a response to a world in flux. And let me repeat, a world in flux, not the fairytale world the honourable Ketan Lal and the honourable Alvick Maharaj spoke about yesterday. A world where energy shocks are more frequent now, where climate change is not a distant threat, but a present reality, where the old certainties no longer apply. Because, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the cost of inaction is far greater than the cost of transformation and Fiji has over a decade and a half of a Government that has torn down institutional democratic constituency consent of Fijians, marginalised and destroyed *iTaukei* aspirations, and force the hands of private sector into compliance by decree. The time for transformation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is now and it is through this Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to speak directly to our people, to our farmers, I mean the real ones. I am only the backyard farmer, so I cannot offer any advice; I can only offer encouragement. To our business owners, to our young people watching from every corner of these islands. For too long we have been dependent on sugar, dependent on imports, dependent on global markets that we cannot influence, and that era, we think, must end. We must now focus to deliver ourselves a resilient Fiji. We are growing the economy. The future of Fijian agriculture lies not in a single crop, but in a rich tapestry of possibilities. Coffee, cocoa, pineapple, white guavas, dragon fruit, vanilla, to name a few. Crops that the world wants, crops that our land can produce, crops that can command premium prices in international markets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one million high-quality coffee seedlings are being planted across 500 acres. Our highlands have the terroir to produce exceptional coffee that can compete on the world stage. Processing facilities are being established in Rakiraki and other parts of Fiji. Value is being retained locally, jobs are being created, skills are being built. I want to thank and acknowledge the owner Coffee Fiji, the company that is spearheading this revival in Rakiraki. As said yesterday by honourable Niudamu, Rakiraki coffee is the sweetest in the world. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think the rule of thumb is that coffee must be anything but sweet. But if the people of Ra want it that way, if they are happy, Fiji is happy to go along with them.

On cocoa, Mr. Speaker, Fiji is producing about 100 tonnes, but the potential is huge. Cocoa Fiji Limited has just successfully exported one metric tonne of cocoa beans to the United States. The industry has the potential to scale to 500 metric tonnes and beyond and bring in 10,000 new farmers to that industry. That, Mr. Speaker, is the price and the target we must set as a nation. And I want to thank the visionary behind this resurgence, a proud Fijian, Mr. Arif Khan, for his dedication and relentlessness, showing determination and being an example of how the private sector, together with the Ministry of Agriculture, provide localised economic zones and employment that sustains Fijians in Fiji.

On pineapple, commercial shipment of three tonnes was successfully exported to New Zealand. Fijian pineapples are fetching a high price in the international market. Exports to the Middle East began last year. In Ba, one farmer began with three acres in 2015. Today, he is cultivating 150 acres, and he hopes to establish Fiji's first pineapple processing factory. That farmer, Mr. Akbar Azim Ali, must be helped to fulfil his dream and his ambition. He supplies today up to 10 tonnes a week in season and was recently awarded Fiji's best pineapple farmer.

Across our rural heartland, we must unlock the extraordinary potential of vanilla farming as a powerful catalyst for inclusive economic development, particularly for our women and our young people in our rural communities, who form the backbone of our agricultural economy. I say this, vanilla represents not only one of the world's highest value spices, often commanding prices exceeding US$200 per kilogramme for premium cured beans, but a pathway to genuine empowerment and resilience. This can transform household livelihoods while advancing gender equality in agriculture.

I am happy to see that while Ra has the sweetest coffee, farmers in Vanua Levu gathered for a two-day symposium in my hometown in Savusavu on vanilla farming techniques. Vanilla, as of today, is the second most expensive spice in the world. This is the kind of ambition that we must encourage. This is the kind of entrepreneurship we must support, and this is, in fact, the reset I would submit we need. As the honourable Minister for Agriculture said this morning, he gets a big budget this year, but that will ensure that they will bring about the tapestry that will sweeten Fiji's agricultural sector.

Transformation requires a solid foundation, and that foundation is built on law. The Ministry of Lands is working towards completing the review of several key legislations – the State Lands Act 1945, Land Use Act 2010, Mining Act 1965 and the Quarries Act 1939. The Draft Bills for the State Lands Act 1945 and the Land Use Act 2010 are expected to be submitted to Cabinet by the end of this month. The review of the Mining Act 1965 and the Quarries Act 1939 is in its final consultation phase. In one election cycle, all four essential statutes have been holistically reviewed. In the previous government's record, they introduced one statute and reviewed none in a decade and a half.

These legislative reforms aim to strengthen transparency, accountability and fairness in the land allocation process. They will improve sustainable management of Fiji's natural resources. They will align existing laws with contemporary environmental and climate change priorities. Land is one of the most valuable national assets. It provides the foundation for homes, livelihoods, communities and economic development. It preserves our cultural identity and our heritage. We have returned land to the rightful landowning units. Over the past year, 18,173 acres of land have been returned. Land that was held for public purposes has now ceased. These are not just land transfers. They are the fulfilment of long-standing commitments, the resolution of historical matters, the strengthening of partnership and the trust between Government and landowning units.

At the Ministry of Lands, we are digitising. We are transforming decades of geological records from paper-based archives into accessible digital databases. For context, land files in my Ministry are older than all of us. To pass time, I sometimes pick up an old file just to read from the first page and it is fascinating. The cursive writing, to the typewriter, to computer printouts, and even still in between this long era of time, the style of English used throughout is evidenced in those pages. The use and the style of English used throughout is evidenced in those pages. Unfortunately, the pages, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are brittle and they are falling off. The digitisation process happening in all of our ministry staff around Fiji, with full-time staff allocated to them seeking to preserve those pages because they contain our history.

We have also established a comprehensive geological digital library at the Ministry. We are digitising survey records, lease information and land administration services. Why? The reason is transparency and efficiency matters, since we are in a world where information moves at the speed of light, we cannot be moving at the speed of paper. An amount of $258,000 has been allocated towards the continued digitisation programme at our ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, access to clean and safe drinking water remains a fundamental right and national priority. The Government has allocated $6.2 million for our groundwater assistance programme. This builds upon the significant achievement in the previous fiscal year, during which the Ministry has completed 96 groundwater sources, benefiting 3,298 households and more than 23,000 Fijians. We are also investing in disaster preparedness and climate resilience:

- Close to $400,000 in Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)-supported assistance for volcanic hazard risk reduction;
- Close to $130,000 to maintain a 24-hour monitoring of earthquakes and tsunamis; and
- Close to $90,000 for Geotech research and geological hazard assessments in landslide-prone areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a vision can only be realised through people entrusted to deliver it. Our officers remain the backbone of our ministry's success. For many years, several critical functions were supported through project-funded positions. These officers have consistently demonstrated exceptional professionalism, dedication, and service. I am therefore pleased to announce that 88 project-funded positions have now been regularised and incorporated as established positions within the Ministry's permanent structure:

- 36 positions within the land survey; and
- 52 positions across groundwater drilling, reticulation, engineering and scientific services, technical functions, and administrative support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was fitting to reward the 36 positions with the appointment letters last week because in the previous week before, those 36 staff were all part of the team that completed the Sawakasa mahogany woodlots, all 4,000 acres of very unforgiving, rough and rugged terrains of Northland, Tailevu. In exalting them last Friday, I challenged the workforce to do 10 per cent more, even with a 10 per cent less budget. I reminded them that each interval of our generation and of our history, some are called to carry more weight than others.

This is their time! Carry more weight because the nation demands it off their shoulders. We face a formidable challenge, yet it is not insurmountable. We are not prisoners of our past, victims of our geography and we are not defined by our vulnerabilities. We have a choice of either clinging to the past and watching it crumble in our hands, or we can have the courage to build something new. This Budget provides us that time, the resource and the framework for transformation, however, the resources alone are not enough. We need political will, private sector partnership and community engagement. Additionally, we need to think beyond the box, the cycle and the politics.

Allow me to speak to the sector that drives the engine of all nations seeking to advance. The private sector has always been the indispensable engine of prosperity in our economy, channelling capital, fostering innovation and creating the jobs and opportunities that lift living standards for families across this nation.

I want to acknowledge the courage and the foresight of our local investors and Fijian entrepreneurs who have already placed their confidence in our shared future, through infrastructure projects that connect communities, technologies that enhance productivity and sustainable enterprises that align growth with environmental stewardship. Yet the scale of our ambition demands even greater mobilisation.

To every business leader, investor from Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, China, Korea, and in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), I say, Fiji offers a compelling proposition. Fiji is safe, has a stable macroeconomic foundation, a skilled and adaptable workforce, and a government committed to de-risking transformative investment through targeted partnership. Your capital, deployed with vision and discipline, will not only generate strong returns, but will shape a more resilient, inclusive, and dynamic economy for generations to come. The time to invest boldly in Fiji's potential, is now.

Mr. Speaker, I reiterate my full support for the 2026-2027 National Budget, and in particular, the $37.1 million allocation to the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources. We will continue to uphold the sustainable stewardship of Fiji's land and mineral resources. We will work smarter to maximise the result. We will remain focused on delivering high-quality service to our landowners, policy stakeholders, and to the people of Fiji.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I begin by stating this very important fact about the national budget. The National Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a central political as well as an economic process and one that lays down not only a short-term strategy, but a long-term strategy as well. And all our budgets, the last three budgets, this one, Mr Speaker, Sir, is linked to the most consultative National Development Plan, ever made in this country. It also lays down not only a short-term plan, but lays out a vision, what we call Vision 2050.

And for the first time, we have a National Development Plan that actually says where we want to go as a country and that is to achieve a high income status. It is doable, it is feasible and the Government in the last three and a half years and in this budget has firmly put that on the agenda.

Across the Coalition Government's first three national budgets, we pursued a consistent strategy, built around four broad objectives - stabilising public finances, addressing the cost of living, rebuilding public services and infrastructure and restoring investor confidence while protecting vulnerable households. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I use my good friend, honourable Usamate's term, I am flabbergasted by another term used by my friend, 'hogwash', that has come from the opposition. In some of the contributions with the exception of one or two, like honourable Bala who made some thoughtful contributions while replying to the 2016 FijiFirst Budget in 2015, as Shadow Minister for Finance, I described it as a deceptive budget of a confused government

Today, I can see some of them who are on the other side from that lot, and I can describe some of the contributions by them as deceptive, a deceptive contribution by a confused and divided opposition - confused economics, confused policy prescriptions, confused understanding of the various variables for economic growth. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this obsession with the operating and capital, yes, it is an important distinction - we want more capital, we want more investment in the infrastructure, in building roads, water supply, but when you talk about national economic growth, this is why I am saying the economics is confused. I know honourable Kumar and honourable Koroilavesau took some cheap shots by comparing the last three Budgets and me with my good friend, the honourable Minister for Finance. They do not know that the honourable Minister for Finance and I worked together with the same Permanent Secretary and with the same staff to deliver the last three budgets. I commend the honourable Minister for pursuing this strategy that we put forward to deliver the economic benefits and growth in the last three budgets.

Many of them, Mr. Speaker, Sir, refused to accept the fact that this Budget has also been formulated, done with the backdrop of this serious global economic crisis and that is something that they have not factored. You know, they have talked about everything from A to Z without actually acknowledging that this is a very serious crisis and you have got to look at your operating and your capital expenditure. Let me just give them a small little lecture on the importance of operating and capital expenditure. The question is not always in a situation. If you have a fuel crisis on our hand we are a small economy, we are at the mercy of the vagaries of international pricing structure, supply and demand and the question then is not whether operating of capital improves productivity, supports demand or builds human capital.

Operating expenditure is not always a waste. It is an important contribution to economic growth and especially when you have a depressed demand as a result of it. You know it, honourable Kumar. You are a bit of an economist. You understand this. Expenditure like tourism promotion, health, education, disaster preparedness, agriculture extension this social protection looking after our people like increasing the social welfare allowance by 50 percent as a result of the crisis. This is all going to add to the growth in demand and it will support growth and it adds to the expenditure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point that the honourable Virendra Lal, I mean, he was talking about profit and loss. When you look at National Budget, you know, Governments are not profit-making entities. They rely on debt financing investments. Budget deficit is not the same as a business loss. Debts must be assessed in relative to the economy, so these are not. The focus is on fiscal sustainability. So, I am actually quite surprised and this is why I am saying that the economy is confused, the policy prescription is confused and this is going to confuse our people who are listening to this debate and I think it is it is only responsible that the Opposition corrects some of those misconceptions because in the unlikely event that they end up this side in Government you know they will have to deal with that. Deal with the debt level. Deal with the deficit but let me just make this point as well because there has been a lot of emphasis on stability and consolidation.

In the last three budgets, we reduced a large fiscal deficit through gradual fiscal consolidation. You cannot have your cake and eat it too. So, when we reformed the Value Added Tax, we removed 9 and we had 0 and 15. When we raised the Company Tax, when we changed the structure of the Water Resource Tax, all these was to enhance our revenue and we did that. But then the Opposition said, "No, this is not good. This is going to affect us." But then they want us to increase support for our people, and we did because we increased revenue sharply in the 2023-2024 financial year from 23.5 percent to 28.1 percent of GDP, an improvement of about 4.6 percentage points. In the 2024-2025 Budget, revenue reached 29.7 percent, the highest level in many years, supported by strong collections from all the different types of taxes, as well as through a very good concerted effort in compliance, which led to increase in revenue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think the Opposition completely lost the plot. By focussing on operating and capital expenditure, by focussing on the expenditure levels in the last two budgets, they forgot that we have reduced the debt-to-GDP ratio. When we reduce the debt-to-GDP ratio, they say, "Oh, it is debt-to-GDP ratio", but then on the other hand, they say, "You need to grow the economy, grow the cake." So, when you grow the cake, when you grow the economy, obviously you are going to reduce the debt-to-GDP ratio and the measure of debt sustainability, debt strategy is whether you can sustain that, whether your GDP is growing, whether you are able to borrow at a reasonable level and maintain repayments, and make sure that you are able to look after all the other sectors of the economy.

In the last three years, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have done a number of things, and I want to repeat some of those key ones. Honourable Kumar talked about how we wrote-off $650 million TELS debt. That helped 53,000 families who were burdened, average debt of about 12,000. She was saying, "No, we have lost that $650 million." You know what? This is during your time and an average of only, out of that $650 million debt, average of about $7 million to $8 million was collected annually. If you divide that $650 million by an average of $8 million annually, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you would need 80 years to collect $650 million. So, we wrote that off, and replaced that with a merit-based scholarship, put a bond that was a direct expenditure of close to about $150 million to $180 million in improving human capital, which is an essential ingredient, which is an answer to the question that honourable Koya raised.

In fact, honourable Koya raised a number of good questions, but it was a good sort of lecture that you could give to economic students about how to grow the economy. In a normal sense, that strategy, that decision by government actually helped human capital development. Now we have a bond, there are more students coming out with qualifications, they do not have to be burdened with debt, they are contributing to the economy and staying at least to serve the bond, so that we are able to build human capital in a way that is better.

There are a number of other things that we have done, to address the cost of living. This is another lie that the Opposition keeps telling. Inflation in 2022 was 6.8 percent, in 2023, it was 2.4 percent, in 2024, it was 4.5 percent but in 2025, it went down to negative 1.4 percent. Part of the reason is through global prices, and part of it is due to what government has provided to the people. Minimum wage, as soon as we came in, it was raised to $4. First of August 2024, it went to $4.50. First of April, it went to $5.

I know someone was saying that the civil servants pay only increased by 3 percent and the FNPF contribution reduced by 2 percent. Honourable Hem Chand, you have to be honest, you have to look at what we did in the 2024-2025 Budget. Civil service pay across was increased between 10 to 23 percent, with additional 3 percent. During COVID, it was reduced from 18 to 10. Employers and employees both had cut the contribution. So, it's important for us to understand, Mr. Speaker, that the government's strategy in the last three years to address the cost of living has worked. It is shown in the figures. The figures, as they say, do not lie.

When you have inflation, official inflation rate in a negative territory, you know that inflation is under control, of course, there are prices in certain areas where you will find it difficult to control. You know, there is this big repetition about VAT, Mr. Speaker said, and there are some politicians like the former governor of the Reserve Bank, who has not won the last two elections that he led his party to.

He is talking about, theory and practice, and these are people who are now enjoying the freedom, the space that this government has provided through media freedom, through no restriction on dialogue. The very people who would not allow an opposition member to be chief guest in a high school are now sitting with us in a panel discussion, and pontificating about economic policies that I and this government pursued in the last three budgets.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B. C. PRASAD. – Yes, I am talking about the policy and the criticism of the budget. They are saying that you could reduce the expenditure by $1 billion. My question to them is tell us where we want to cut that $1 billion.

That is the answer that they need to give because that is the criticism that they are making of this budget, Mr. Speaker, and that is my challenge to them. Show us that $1 billion. Where would you cut that $1 billion now at this point in time when you are going through a global economic crisis or global fuel crisis? That is the question that we want to ask. There is a suggestion, Mr. Speaker, that we should devalue our dollar.

Again, you know, this is the most weird thing that I have heard from an economist anytime in my lifetime in this country in assessing budgets and other things. So, Mr. Speaker, I say it is important that we are honest about what the government inherited. And Honourable Usamate, my friend, I want to tell you, when the government comes in and when the mess is this high that they have to deal with it, four years is not enough, four years is not enough.

Nabukalou Creek will be clean, but four years is not enough. So, it is very important for us to understand that. One suggestion on the Sugar Industry, Mr. Speaker, before I take my seat. I think it is very important for us to understand that the decline in industry started in 2007. 3.2 million tons, 310 tonnes of sugar around that time from 18,000 growers to now less than 12,000. What happened? It happened because of the dismantling of the sugar industry institutions, governance and monitoring mechanisms, the loss of $350 million EU funding for restructuring of the industry. It is this Government, and I want to thank the honourable Prime Minister for restoring and putting back the Parliamentary Sugar Select Committee, which includes the Leader of the Opposition, honourable Praveen Bala, and we were in the West. I want to thank both honourable Bala and honourable Leader of the Opposition for their constructive engagement and contribution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, farmers enjoyed and appreciated that this was a joint bipartisan Parliamentary Committee, devoid of politics, trying to address the issues of the sugarcane farmers. This is why I am very pleased to inform this House, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that a lot of farmers have rejected the call for boycott by a politician who is running into the sugar bell to rescue his political fortune and they have all started harvesting the cane. This is about the Budget, we promised that after the Budget session, the Committee will also travel to Labasa and this industry stakeholders have already made a submission to the Minister for Sugar, and the Government will consider further assistance where it is able to and necessary to support our farmers.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I want to once again commend the Minister for Finance, Permanent Secretary, all the staff of the Reserve Bank, FRCS. I know that all of them are very, very capable, committed people who have the interest of the country in their heart and the Budget is a reflection of that continuation of that hard work and support and therefore I fully support the budget and commend the budget not only to the house but to the people of Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- That, honourable Members, is the last of our speakers on the debate on the 2026-2027 Appropriation Bill 2026.

Given the time and I understand and am informed of the length of the time the Minister for Finance will exercise his Right of Reply, then I suggest we now suspend our proceedings for lunch. Parliament will resume in one and a half hours.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.57 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.37 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we have come to the end of the debate on the Appropriation Bill. All that is left is for the honourable Minister for Finance, Commerce and Business Development be given his Right of Reply.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Assistant Ministers, and fellow Parliamentarians, distinguished guests, viewers, and all the people of our lovely nation, Fiji, a very good and blessed afternoon to you all.

I wish to acknowledge and thank God for all our lives, for the provisions, covering, wisdom, and healing provided to all of us to this day and to our nation. I rise today to provide my Right of Reply and to speak to the heart of why this Budget exists at this difficult time. That is, to the well-being, dignity, and future of every Fijian, every Fijian family, every small business owner, every farmer, fisherman, every worker, every employer, every manufacturer, and even miner who carries this nation forward each day.

Mr. Speaker Sir, at the outset, I wish to thank all honourable Members who have contributed to the debate on the 2026-2027 National Budget. I have listened carefully to every contribution made in this House and I appreciate them all, because an open and healthy debate is the cornerstone of any vibrant parliamentary democracy such as ours. I can see that some contributions are well prepared, analysed, well researched, however, some are full of generalisations and requests and considerations as if you are not in a period. I wish to openly say that we are still in a fuel crisis period, either because of supply or the price, and we are not out of the woods yet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no budget is ever perfect. Every budget involves difficult choices, competing priorities and trade-offs. Before responding to the specific issues raised by the honourable members, allow me to repeat some broad observations regarding this budget and the circumstances under which it was prepared.

First and foremost, I wish to sincerely thank the honourable Prime Minister, the former finance minister, the cabinet ministers and Government colleagues for placing their trust and confidence in me to prepare and announce this budget on their behalf. I am just the mouthpiece that the budget came about due to their hard work, advice and technical recommendations. I also wish to thank our peers, the budget team and all staff at the Ministry of Finance for their hard work and perseverance during these five months of budget work.

I will not forget the contribution of the CEO for Fiji Revenue Customs Service, Governor for Reserve Bank of Fiji and CEO for Fiji National Provident Fund and their respective teams, all the Permanent Secretaries, staff in all ministries, departments, independent bodies and statutory organisations for their contributions.

This was one of the most challenging budgets that any finance minister could be asked to prepare, probably similar to the one made after COVID-19 hit our nation and the global world. When work on the budget commenced, Fiji was confronted by an increasingly uncertain global environment. We just came out of COVID-19, then the Russia versus Ukraine conflict came about, followed by the conflict in the Middle East which triggered a sharp escalation in international fuel prices. Global economic growth was slowing, inflationary prices were beginning to re-emerge and supply chains were once again under pressure. At the same time, Government continued to face significant fiscal constraints while the development needs of our country continue to grow and these circumstances required difficult decisions.

Every ministry requested additional funding, every sector had general need and every proposal had merit. However, responsible budgeting is not about improving every request. This is about making difficult choices, and it is about carefully balancing today's needs with tomorrow's responsibilities. This is about ensuring that while we continue supporting our people during difficult times, we do not compromise the financial future of our country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this budget was prepared just months before a general election. Historically, election year budgets are often associated with large spending increases, generous promises, tax deductions and measures designed to gain political popularity. Many expected this Government to do exactly the same. We prepared this budget to protect Fiji, our economy and our people. We did not attempt to hide our fiscal challenges, overstate government's financial capacity, make promises that future Governments would struggle to finance. Instead, we presented the people of Fiji with an honest assessment of our country's economic and fiscal position.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we openly acknowledged the challenges we face and explained the difficult choices before us. Additionally, we outlined responsible pathways to strengthen our economy over the medium term. Sometimes, responsible decision is also a difficult decision and saying no is more responsible than saying yes. Protecting the country's long-term stability requires resisting the temptation to pursue short-term political popularity. That is the philosophy behind this budget.

Mr. Speaker, sir, I also wish to thank the people of Fiji. Since I delivered the budget, I have been humbled by the level of understanding and maturity demonstrated by the people. We have participated in television and radio programmes. We have given media interviews and attended public forums organised by various organisations, including Dialogue Fiji. We have met with businesses, civil society organisations, professional bodies, development partners, and ordinary Fijians. These engagements have been extremely valuable. They have allowed us to clarify Budget measures, explain Government’s thinking, receive valuable feedback and listen directly to the concerns of our people.

I am pleased to say that there has been broad acceptance of this Budget. Many people have recognised the difficult circumstances under which it was prepared. We are still in the fuel crisis.

Many have acknowledged that Government has attempted to strike a reasonable balance between maintaining fiscal discipline and protecting households, businesses and the broader economy during the current fuel crisis. One observation I have made throughout this debate, is that while there have been differing opinions on individual policies, there has been no comprehensive alternative budget or fiscal strategy presented.

There have been suggestions regarding particular measures. There have been calls for additional spending in certain sectors. There have been recommendations to reduce the fiscal deficit and debt more quickly. However, there has been no alternative framework explaining how all of these objectives can be achieved simultaneously. This is understandable because governing is ultimately about balancing competing priorities.

Every additional dollar spent in one area, means fewer resources available elsewhere. Every reduction in taxation must be financed somehow. Every increase in expenditure must ultimately be paid by taxpayers or through borrowing. These are the realities of public finance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the most important lessons I have learned, is that budgets are not simply about numbers. They are about choices. They are about priorities. They are about our people. Every figure in the Budget represents a policy decision. Every allocation represents a trade-off. Every saving made in one area creates an opportunity to invest in another. That is why preparing a national Budget is one of the greatest responsibilities entrusted to any government.

Over the past three and a half years, this Coalition Government has governed during one of the most challenging periods in Fiji's modern history. When we assumed office, our economy was still recovering from the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. We then faced the global inflation surge. We managed the impacts of aggressive interest rate increases by central banks around the world. We responded to the consequences of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. We adjusted to changing international trade conditions. We looked at what we are taking over and did a lot of clean-ups. Some are still being done, and Honourable Kamikamica mentioned an estimated $1 billion in dues.

Looking at cleaning up our laws, looking at the gaps in our services, we came up with a National Development Plan (NDP) for our guidance. And today, we continue responding to the economic consequences of the conflict in the Middle East and the global fuel crisis.

Despite these unprecedented global shocks, Fiji has remained resilient. Economic growth has returned. Employment has recovered. Tourism has reached record levels. Investor confidence has improved. We have restored democratic freedoms. We have strengthened transparency and accountability. We have rebuilt confidence in our public institutions. During this current fuel crisis, Government has extended fuel duty concessions to Energy Fiji Limited, bus operators, shipping, manufacturing, mining and hotels, easing the pressure on electricity tariffs, fares, and cost of doing business. We are covering the fuel surcharges for vulnerable households, earning below $30,000 annually, and for small businesses with turnover under $30,000, at a cost of approximately $4 million a year, and this is in addition to the existing $10 million Electricity Lifeline Subsidy.

Bus fare increases have been fully absorbed by the Government at a cost of $20 million ensuring ordinary Fijians were not made to bear the burden. Social welfare recipients received a temporary 50 percent income top-up between May and July, at a cost of around $24 million, to help our most vulnerable through the worst of the price pressures.

Fiji Airways, our national carrier and our vital artery for tourism and connectivity, has been supported through an extended loss carry-forward period, a moratorium on outdoor fees and a new Tourism Services Tax directed specifically to strengthen its financial position. This was agreed to in a collective meeting.

To encourage employment and ease of cost of doing business, the mandatory FNPF employer contribution rate has been temporarily reduced from 10 to 8 percent, while employers who voluntary contribute more will benefit from 150 percent tax deduction. This is a temporary measure to help employers and manufacturers during this fuel crisis keep the employees employed, assist in training and skilling of employees and assist the manufacturers who had their Export Income Deduction removed.

We have laid the foundations for significant investments that will transform Fiji's economy over the coming decade.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during our cleanup, when we came in, we saw a lot of mess and inherited a $9.7 billion debt by July 2023 after we rode along the 2023 budget. I will talk on the 2023 budget later. Debt to GDP ratio was at a high rate of 91.8 percent, and yet there were number of incomplete projects such as FNU, Queen Elizabeth Drive, Sukuna Park, Swimming Pool, Govind Park, unpaid creditors such as USP, Film Rebate, *Walesi* and as stated by the honourable Kamikamica, it is more than $1 billion.

Also, we saw there were a lot of things to be done especially to improve our health sector. A lot of laws to change or improve or to introduce. There is a need to take the services to our people, wherever they are and hear them on whatever we need to put in place.

With a worrying fiscal break ground, that is of high debt to GDP ratio, and the need of our people for employment and social services, such as health, education and social welfare, we prepared our National Development Plan after wide consultations. Honourable Professor Biman Prasad mentioned previously about our National Development Plan. However, after that, we increased the weight because of the worrying fiscal background.

After years, when we saw the fiscal position improving, we reduced VAT and increased the zero-rated VAT products to assist our people, especially on our vulnerable households. When we identified weaknesses in certain programmes we revealed them. When circumstances changed, we adapted our policies. That is not weakness, that is responsible Government from when we took over.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also recognise that there is still much work ahead. We know that Government's operational expenditure has grown significantly over the many years. We know that Fiji requires greater investment in productive infrastructure. We know that we must continue improving the efficiency of the public service. We know that we must gradually rebuild our fiscal buffers, and we know that we must continue reducing public debt over time.

That is exactly why this Budget is not simply about managing the next 12 months. It is about beginning the transition towards a stronger, more productive and more resilient economy. It is about making the investments today, that will create opportunities tomorrow. It is about ensuring that Fiji is better prepared for future shocks, whether they arise from global conflicts, pandemics, natural disasters or economic crises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is built upon one simple principle - Government must live within its own means while protecting those who need it the most. That has guided every decision we have made. It guided our expenditure decisions. It guided our taxation decisions. It guided our borrowing strategy, and it guided our borrowing strategy, and it guided every measure contained in the Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is easy to promise everything. It is much harder to prioritise. It is easy to criticise every decision. It is much harder to prepare a budget that balances economic growth, fiscal responsibility, social protection, and the long-term national development. That is exactly what this Budget seeks to achieve.

With these remarks, allow me to turn to some of the broader issues that have been raised before, both inside and outside this august House, before responding to the specific contributions made by honourable Members. One question that has been raised repeatedly since I delivered the Budget, was whether this can genuinely be a “Responsible Budget for a Sustainable Future.” Some have argued that because the Budget projects a 7 percent fiscal deficit, it cannot possibly be regarded as “responsible.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I respectfully disagree. Responsibility is not determined by a single number in the budget. Responsibility is determined by the decisions government makes when confronted with extraordinary circumstances. The Budget was not prepared during normal economic conditions. It was prepared at a time when Fiji was confronted with one of the most significant external shocks since COVID-19. The conflict in the Middle East triggered a sharp increase in global fuel prices, increasing the cost of transport, electricity generation, imported goods, and almost every aspect of economic activity.

At the same time, government revenue projections were revised downwards by $200 million due to the expected slowdown in economic activity. Yet, despite this reduction in revenue, Government still had to finance a number of national priorities. We had to fund the general elections, we had to provide funding for the constitutional referendum, we had to prepare for the national census. We had to commence major infrastructure projects that had already been planned and negotiated with our development partners. We had to continue supporting vulnerable households, we had to absorb increases in bus fares and electricity tariffs. We had to ensure that essential public services continue without interruptions. These were not optional expenditures; these were national priorities.

The Government could not simply walk away from them. Compare this with the FijiFirst Government's 2023 Budget. In there we saw that expenditure was around $3.82 billion, revenue of around $2.9 billion, leaving a deficit of around $8.2 million, which is around 7.4 percent of GDP, a deficit. So, higher than our deficit that we are targeting for the next financial year. So, the 7 percent level of deficit was there from the FijiFirst Budget in 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, several commentators have suggested that Government should have reduced the fiscal deficit more aggressively. That is a perfectly reasonable question. However, those making that argument also have a responsibility to explain - how they would have achieved it?

Would they have reduced the salaries of more than 42,000 civil servants whose income supports well over 200,000 Fijians? Would they have reduced social welfare payments at a time when many households are already struggling with higher living costs? Would they have removed the $85 guaranteed cane price that supports thousands of farming families? Would they have abolished the $200 Back-to-School Assistance?

Would they have reduced tertiary scholarships? Would they have cut fundings for hospitals, schools, and policing? Would they have delayed the General Election or the Constitutional Referendum? Would they have postponed major infrastructure projects that Fiji urgently requires or would they instead have increased taxes? Would they have increased VAT? Would they have imposed VAT on the 22 zero-rated basic food items? Would they have increased income tax? Would they have increased corporate tax? Would they have increased custom duties on businesses already dealing with high operating costs? Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are not theoretical questions. These are the real policy choices confronting every Minister.

It is much harder to explain which services should be reduced, which taxes should be increased, or which families should receive less support, but it is easy to stand outside Government and call for a lower deficit and suggest politically convenient measures, like reducing Cabinet size and salaries, which will just save us a few million.

HON. P.D KUMAR.- That matters!

MR. SPEAKER.- One moment. Honourable Usamate and honourable Kumar, will you stop your running commentaries while he is responding. You may do so at the appropriate time, but not all the time. Please, it sounds like an echo from here.

You may proceed, honourable Minister.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This Government made a conscious decision. We chose to protect our people while continuing the path of fiscal conservation. That, in our view, is responsible fiscal management. Some have also suggested that the Government has not done enough to reduce its own expenditure before asking the nation to make sacrifices. Again, I respectfully disagree.

The Budget contains one of the most comprehensive expenditure restraint exercises undertaken in recent years. Operational expenditures across Government have been reduced. Official travel has been significantly curtailed. Workshops have been reduced. Communication expenditure has been reduced. Operational goods and services have been rationalised. Recruitment has been restricted to critical positions. Funding for vacant positions has been reduced. Grants to a number of agencies have also been reviewed.

Even Ministers and Members of Parliament continue to contribute through the salary reductions that were introduced previously. Thank you again, every member of Parliament. Mr. Speaker, Sir, responsible fiscal management begins with Government leading by example, before asking anyone else to tighten their belt, Government must first tighten its own, and that is exactly what we have done.

One observation I have made is that when people ask about the Budget, they usually ask only one question - what is the total expenditure and what is there for me? Very few ask about total revenue. Very few ask about financing. Very few ask about debt repayments, and very few look at the long term.

The national budget is much more than expenditure. It consists of four equally important components. First, the revenue. Second, expenditure. Then, the fiscal deficit, where expenditure exceeds revenue, and fourth, the financing required to fund the deficit while continuing to repay loans - loans borrowed by previous governments. These components cannot be separated.

Every dollar of expenditure must either be financed through taxation, borrowing, or concessional support from our development partners. We cannot clap with one hand. Revenue and expenditure must go together. Borrowing must also be affordable. Debt must remain sustainable. That is what a responsible budget is all about, and that is what we are doing this year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another misconception is that every budget should automatically include significant increases in government expenses. Some people measure the success of a budget simply by asking how much additional money has been allocated?

The question, therefore, should not always be whether allocations have increased. The more important question is whether existing allocations are being used efficiently? Are projects being delivered? Are services improving? Are Ministries spending money wisely? Are taxpayers receiving value for every dollar? Those are the questions that matter, and what I can say is that they are being well catered for by this Government.

Projects are being delivered to our people, not only to those of us in the city, but to the rural areas. We have opened up the rural areas. Services have been decentralised and improved. Every taxpayer dollar spent has been accounted for. We can do more, but the current fuel crisis we are facing is restricting us for the time being.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, unlike in the past, we have not attempted to hide the country's fiscal challenges. We have openly acknowledged the size of our fiscal deficit. We have openly acknowledged the size of our public debt. We have openly acknowledged the Government's operational expenditure, and we have openly acknowledged the reforms that are necessary. Some may see this as politically inconvenient. I see this as responsible leadership. The people of Fiji deserve honesty. They deserve transparency. They deserve a government that tells them the truth, even when the truth is uncomfortable. That is precisely what this Government has done.

Another issue that has attracted considerable discussion is Government's response to the global fuel crisis. Some have questioned why Government intervened by absorbing increase in bus fares welfare payments and electricity tariffs, and so on. But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, its consequences have been felt by every Fijian family. Without Government's intervention, thousands of our households could have faced even greater financial hardship, and this is why Government acted immediately. We did not wait until budget day. We absorbed the increase from day one.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another issue that has generated considerable discussion is taxation. Some have asked why Government did not reduce taxes further? Others have argued that Government should have increased taxes to reduce the deficit. Government carefully considered every available option. We also considered the recommendations made by international institutions like IMF. However, after carefully assessing the likely impact on households and businesses, the Government made a deliberate decision - we did not increase VAT, we did not increase income tax, we did not increase corporate tax, we did not impose VAT on the 22 zero-rated basic food items. At a time when families and businesses are already facing challenges, because of the fuel crisis, increasing taxes may have imposed an additional burden.

Through the budget process, one principle remained constant for us - to protect the most vulnerable. Every major decision was assessed against one simple question; how will this affect ordinary Fijian families? That is why social protection programmes have been maintained. That is why Government continues to support public transport. That is why electricity assistance has been maintained and that is why we have chosen not to reduce civil service salaries. That is why we continue to invest in health, education, and public safety despite the significant fiscal presence we face. Hence, fiscal responsibility and social responsibility are not mutually exclusive. They must go together. That is exactly what this Budget seeks to achieve.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, having addressed the broader issues surrounding this Budget, allow me to respond to some of the specific matters firstly raised by honourable Members during this debate. I may not respond to every comment individually, but I will address the principal issues that have been raised.

I begin with the contribution made by the honourable Leader of the Opposition. First of all, I thank him for acknowledging many of the economic challenges confronting Fiji. In many respects, his speech reinforced what the Government itself has been saying for some time, that Fiji is operating in an increasingly uncertain global environment, characterised by high fuel prices, slower global growth, and significant fiscal crisis. These challenges are not new. They are real. They are supported by international evidence. They are recognised by institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and other credit agencies. The real question is not whether these challenges exist, the real question is how Government responds to them. That is exactly what this Budget seeks to do.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition, I am not sure if your understanding is the same with other honourable Members in the House, who wish to see that we continue with growth or expansionary plans policies, and wish to see increases in expenditures. While you on the other hand, would like to see reduction in expenditures.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition also raised concerns regarding delays in the implementation of capital projects. This is an issue the Government itself has openly acknowledged.

Many of our major infrastructure projects are currently completing feasibility studies, engineering designs, procurement processes and financing arrangements. These are large and technically complex investments. Good planning requires proper preparation before construction begins. As these projects move into full implementation over the coming years, capital expenditure will increase significantly.

I also agree that project implementation must improve, and that is precisely why we continue strengthening project management across Government, and why implementation performance forms an important part of accountability for heads of Ministries and agencies.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition also referred to virements and reallocation of budget allocation over recent years as irresponsible. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the important point is not simply the value of reallocations. The important point is that the Government has continued to operate within the total appropriations approved by Parliament. Reallocations are an accepted feature of public financial management – circumstances change, projects move at different speeds, some programmes require additional resources while others experience delays, and that is precisely why virement provisions exist under the Financial Management Act.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition also talked about budget reallocations, but these budget reallocations were equally common under the previous government. In fact, several revised budgets were introduced during their time in office, so it is not a new issue. The issue, therefore, is not whether reallocations occur. The issue is whether public finances remain under control, and they have, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition, and then honourable Koya, said Government should seize new opportunities rather than simply respond to external shocks. That is precisely what we are doing. The Budget is not simply about crisis management. It includes major investments in road, health, water, flood mitigation, renewable energy, airport expansion, and investment facilitation. We are strengthening tourism while simultaneously promoting economic diversification into new sectors. That is exactly how new opportunities are created.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition also emphasised the importance of maintaining a credible medium-term fiscal strategy and strengthening public financial management. I could not agree more. Indeed, that is why the Government is implementing major public financial management reforms; that is why we are undertaking a functional review; that is why we are improving procurement systems; that is why we are strengthening project implementations; and that is why we have committed to gradually rebuilding fiscal buffers over the medium term.

However, fiscal discipline, Mr. Speaker, Sir, must also be viewed in historical context. The previous government increased public debt from around 50 percent of GDP in 2006 to around 90 percent in July 2022. Today, our objective is to gradually place debt back into a downward trajectory while continuing to protect economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Leader of the Opposition expressed concern as well on the public debt. Debt should concern every member of this House and Government welcomes that discussion. However, debt should be assessed consistently. When discussing debt, it is important to distinguish between nominal debt and debt as a percentage of GDP.

In nominal terms, debt will generally continue increasing unless Government records sustained budget surpluses and very few countries achieve that. The more meaningful measure is debt relative to the size of the economy. When this Government took office, the debt at the end of 2022-2023 was projected at approximately 83.1 percent of GDP. The current projection is around 84.8 percent of GDP. While this remains high, it has broadly stabilised despite successive external shocks. A medium-term objective, Mr. Speaker, Sir, remains clear and that is to reduce debt through: stronger economic growth; responsible fiscal management; and sustained fiscal consolidation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is equally important to remember that the previous Government increased nominal public debt from around $2.8 billion in 2006 to around $10 billion by July 2023. This debt does not include the one billion dollars in dues, unpaid and unfinished projects with sunk costs or loss by the previous Government. Imagine if we include the one billion dollars to the debt, their ratio position would be worse. That $1 billion worth of debt and incomplete projects and sunk costs are now being catered for by this Government for the last three years. We are still paying for that, and we are still trying to finish some of the projects. Imagine if we used that $1 billion for productive purposes in the last three years. Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we do more analysis to date back to 2006, I do not think I will have the time to share all of those today.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition also referred to contingent liabilities. He is correct that contingent liabilities require monitoring. Government already does so, however, contingent liabilities are not treated as public debt unless, and until Government becomes legally liable to assume those obligations. Nevertheless, Government continues to monitor these exposures carefully, because they remain important fiscal risks.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition also referred to the possibility of the Fiji dollar being devalued. Exchange rate policy is an extremely important macroeconomic issue. Public comments of this nature should therefore be made carefully and responsibly. Speculations regarding exchange rate adjustments can unnecessarily create uncertainty for businesses, investors and financial markets. These matters should always be guided by careful economic analysis, rather than political commentary. Given the current high level of foreign reserves, there is no possibility of a devaluation in the horizon. I repeat, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will not have any devaluation!

The Leader of the Opposition also referred to the size of the civil service and that is precisely why the functional review is currently underway. The objective is not simply to reduce numbers, the objective is to build a modern, efficient and productive public service, capable of delivering better outcomes for the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Leader of the Opposition called for a stronger environment for private sector growth, again, I agree. Indeed, this Government has taken significant steps to improve the investment climate. We have established the investment facilitation taskforce, we continuing reviewing investment processes, and we are improving coordination between Government agencies. We welcome further specific proposals from the Opposition, because broader statements alone will not improve the investment climate, practical solutions will!

I will now turn to the contribution made by the honourable Premila Kumar. She described this as an irresponsible Budget because the fiscal deficit is projected at around 7 percent of GDP. Before I go on further, I wish to remind us that the 2022-2023 budget by her Government projected a 7.4 percent deficit. So why the difference? All the same percentage more? At that time, there was no fuel crisis, but only can see it as an irresponsible election budget, because the election was held on 2022.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, context is important. No responsible Finance Minister looks at the fiscal position in isolation. The honourable Member conveniently ignored the fact that this Budget was prepared during a global fuel crisis that reduced government revenue by around $200 million. When revenue declines because of external shocks, the fiscal deficit naturally widens, unless government responds by either significantly reducing expenditures and increasing taxes.

Government carefully considered both options. We reduced operational expenditures across ministries, we reduced travel and workshops, and so on. So, those savings allowed us to finance unavoidable national priorities. I have already mentioned some, the General Election, the Constitutional Referendum, the National Census and support measures for households affected by the rising fuel prices. The alternative would have been to significantly reduce essential public services or increase taxes during a crisis. Government deliberately chose not to do that.

The honourable Member also suggested that Government is living beyond its means. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I respectfully disagree. Living beyond one's means would involve continuing to expand expenditure without restraint, while ignoring the country's fiscal position. This budget does exactly the opposite. We have openly acknowledged our fiscal challenges. We have committed ourselves to restoring fiscal sustainability over the medium term.

The Honourable Member also referred to the downward revision and economic growth. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was somewhat surprised by that criticism. Economic forecasts are not determined by political preference; they are determined by economic conditions. When international fuel prices increase significantly, when global economic activity slows and when international trade weakens, growth forecasts around the world are revised downward. That is precisely what has happened internationally and locally. If conditions improve, then growth will improve, and that is exactly what we hope will happen.

The honourable Member also referred to the increase in public debt. Once again, it is important that we compare like with like. Debt should not simply be discussed in nominal dollar terms. Every year, economies grow, governments invest, borrowing occurs. The more meaningful measure is debt relative to GDP.

The honourable Member referred to debt being around 83 percent of GDP when this Government assumed office. It reduced further in 2025 and 2026, and today, despite multiple external shocks, debt is projected at around 84.8 percent of GDP by next year. While it is still high, it has broadly stabilised. More importantly, our medium-term objective remains to reduce debt gradually, through strong economic growth, and sustained fiscal consolidation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Kirpal called for the removal of VAT from basic foods. I respectfully point out that the 22 essential basic food items are already zero rated for VAT, costing an estimated $250 million. If the honourable Member believes additional items should be zero rated, I welcome his specific proposal. Should other taxes increase? Should expenditures be reduced? Or should borrowing increase? Responsible policy making requires answering both sides of the equation.

The honourable Member also stated that students are being turned away from school because of unpaid fees. The Government has not received evidence supporting that assertion. Please, bring the students to the correct authority. As education remains one of the highest priorities of this Government, and we will continue working to ensure that every child, has the opportunity to learn and to succeed.

While much of the debate has understandably focused on this year's budget message, it is equally important that we do not lose sight of the bigger picture. Budgets should never be viewed in isolation. Every Budget is one step in a much longer journey. Every Budget should move the country closer to its long-term development aspirations, that is exactly what this Budget seeks to do.

This Budget is not simply about responding to today's fuels crisis. It is about preparing Fiji for the next decade. It is about making the investments today that will create opportunities for future generations. It is about laying the foundation for stronger, more productive and a more resilient economy. Hence, we have to invest in the productive infrastructure our country urgently requires, and that is why this Government has begun the important task of gradually rebalancing expenditure.

Over time, we want a larger share of Government's resources directed towards productive capital investments because it is investments that expands productive capacity. Investments create jobs. Investments improve productivity. Investments lower business costs. Investments strengthen resilience, and investments ultimately raises the standard of living.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some commentators have suggested that Government should be thinking about long-term economic transformation. I respectfully submit that this is exactly what we are doing. Across the country, major infrastructure programmes are now moving from planning into implementation. Over the next several years Fiji will witness unprecedented investment in roads, major investments in hospitals, significant upgrades to water and wastewater infrastructure, flood mitigation projects, airport expansion, port redevelopment, renewable energy, digital infrastructure, public transport. These are not simply construction projects; they are investments that will fundamentally change the productive capacity of our economy. They will reduce transport costs, improve logistics and increase private sector productivity, improve public health, strengthen climate resilience, create thousands of jobs and position Fiji for stronger long-term growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, infrastructure investment is not an expense. It is an investment in future prosperity. Every modern economy that has successfully transformed itself, has invested heavily in infrastructure. Fiji cannot be any different. If we want higher economic growth, we must continue investing in the foundations that make economic growth possible.

However, Government cannot achieve this transformation alone. The private sector remains the agent of economic growth. Government creates the enabling environment. Businesses make the investments. Entrepreneurs create jobs. Workers increase productivity. Together we grow the economy and that is why this Government continues to place significant emphasis on improving the investment climate.

We have established the high-level Investment Facilitation Taskforce. Its purpose is simple, to remove unnecessary bottlenecks. This initiative does not bypass laws. It does not weaken environmental safeguards. It does not compromise governance, instead it makes Government work better.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, economic growth is also about diversification. Tourism will remain the backbone of our economy for many years to come. It generates employment. It earns foreign exchange. It supports thousands of small businesses. However, we also recognise that Fiji cannot rely on one sector alone. The pandemic reminded us of that lesson. Our long-term strategy is therefore to continue strengthening tourism, while simultaneously expanding new areas of growth.

We want greater investment in the business process outsourcing. Digital services, renewable energy, agri-business, value-added manufacturing, the blue economy, knowledge-based industries, innovations, technology and new export opportunities. A stronger and more diversified economy will make Fiji more resilient to future global shocks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also recognise that stronger economic growth must be accompanied by stronger public institutions. The Functional Review currently underway is therefore much more than an exercise in restructuring. As we strengthen public institutions, we must also strengthen the fiscal discipline. The objective is clear - this is not something that can be achieved overnight. Fiscal repair is a journey, not a single budget. This Budget represents another important step on that journey.

Another important lesson from recent years, is that Government cannot solve every problem through increased spending alone. Economic development is not simply measured by the size of Government expenditure. It is measured by the quality of that expenditure. Every dollar must generate value. Every project must deliver results. Every programme must improve people's lives, and every investment must contribute to build stronger economic growth.

That is why improving implementation is now just as important, as increasing funding. There is a need for better planning, better procurement, better project management, better monitoring, better accountability. These are the reforms that we are doing that will determine whether Fiji achieves its development ambitions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, ultimately, every budget is about people. Behind every allocation is a student seeking a better education. A farmer trying to increase production. A business investing in expansion. A patient waiting for treatment. A family hoping for affordable electricity. A young graduate looking for employment. A pensioner seeking dignity. A community needing reliable roads and clean water. These are the people this Budget is designed to serve.

I wish to divert our attention to my other portfolio, and that is Commerce and Business Development. Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the support of the European Union and other partners, the Ministry has advanced several targeted initiatives to grow investments and diversify a productive base.

Through the grant to the ICT Business Programme, the Ministry administered three disbursements totalling of $834,000 to Pepper Advantage Fiji Limited between 2022 and 2024 to support the business process of outsourcing operations, with a further $1.5 million allocated in the 2024-2025 National Budget to sustain this support.

The Commercial Agriculture Taskforce, established in 2023 in partnership with Investment Fiji, has attracted and progressed five major investments - the Wonderful Company, Aitken Spence Plantations, Bula Coffee, Pacific Trade Invest, and FMF Foods Limited – spanning papaya, citrus, honey, palm oil, coffee, cocoa, pineapple, and cassava starch manufacturing.

The Nutraceutical and Medicinal Cannabis Taskforce conducted 17 nationwide consultations across 12 government agencies, engaging 513 participants, of whom 75 percent were supportive.

The Kava Taskforce, which continues to work with the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways to review the Kava Bill 2016 against current market standards, to strengthen the legal and quality control framework protecting this important industry.

And 2024 Government approved policy framework for significant investment which has given Government a formal mechanism through Investment Fiji, the Ministry and the Economic Strategy Committee, to evaluate major projects. This framework underpinned the approval of the $300 million Namuka Bay Resort Project in Sigatoka in 2024.

Government amended the Real Estate Agents Regulation 2024 to modernise the commission structure governing real estate agency fees and appeals.

The Anti-Scam Taskforce delivered Fiji’s first National Scam Awareness Week in August 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to report that Fiji successfully participated in the Expo 2025 Osaka Kansai following Cabinet's approval.

The Ministry also commenced a comprehensive audit of the Fiji Investment Corporations Limited's account covering the period 2006 to 2024, to close a long-standing compliance gap and restore financial accountability.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian Made Farm to Fork initiative continues to connect local farmers directly with hotels and resorts. Alongside this investment work, the Ministry has pursued a sustained programme of reform to make Fiji a simpler and more competitive place to do business.

In 2023, Cabinet endorsed the priority legislative reforms underpinning Starting a Business Subsystem, improving transparency and efficiency in business registration and reducing administrative barriers. The same year, the government established an investment facilitation committee. In 2024, the Government rebranded and relaunched the bizFIJI portal as businessNOW FIJI, modernising the platform. The Starting a Business Subsystem itself went live on businessNOW FIJI platform in 2024.

Work has already progressed on the Building Permit Approval Subsystem through 2025 and into 2026, including in stakeholder engagement and technical consultation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if there is one thing this past year has proven beyond doubt, it is the extraordinary resilience of the Fijian people. Despite global oil shock, despite moderating consumer demand, despite the uncertainty that has gripped the market, our tourism sector posted a 7 percent increase in visitor arrivals in the first quarter of 2026.

Our farmers, our market vendors, our tradesmen and women, our public servants and our private sector workers have continued to show up, to adapt and to provide for their families, even as floods have risen around them.

Investment lending rose by an extraordinary 78.6 percent in this year to April 2026, reaching \$582.7 million, driven by confidence in real estate, construction and tourism. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as Minister responsible also for Commerce and Business Development, I want to speak directly to the question of investment, because private sector investment, not Government spending alone, will be the true engine of Fiji's growth in the years ahead.

I am proud to inform this House that Investment Fiji is currently facilitating 254 significant investment projects, with a combined potential value of \$8.9 billion, covering tourism, real estate, digital infrastructure, renewable energy, agriculture and manufacturing. Of these, 107 projects are already under construction and will become operational within the next three years. This achievement has not gone unnoticed internationally.

Investment Fiji was awarded the AIM Investment Awards 2025 in Abu Dhabi for the best FDI agency for Southeast Asia and Oceania, a recognition of the quality of our investment promotion capability and our growing standing in the global investment community. To build on this momentum, companies put in place targeted solutions to unlock further investments and economic growth in this Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, finalising Fiji's Trade Policy Framework 2006-2035 to give exporters and investors long-term policy certainty, the Assistant Minister for Commerce and Business Development will continue with the work on our trade and market access agenda.

Fiji's Net International Investment Position (NIIP), though negative at around \$16 billion, reflects something positive - a far greater stock of foreign capital choosing to invest in Fiji than Fijian capital invested abroad. That is a vote of confidence in our economy, our institutions, our people and it is a vote of confidence this Government intends to keep earning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite the challenges we face today, I remain optimistic about Fiji's future. We have a resilient economy. We have hardworking people. We have strong institutions. We have supportive development partners. We have enormous natural advantages, and most importantly, we have the opportunity to make the right decision today that will benefit future generations.

This Budget has deliberately been prepared using conservative assumptions because uncertainty remains high. If global fuel prices ease faster than expected, if tourism continues to outperform expectations, if investment accelerates, if Government revenue exceeds current projections, then Fiji's fiscal position will improve even faster than we currently forecast. That is exactly what Government hopes to see.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our vision is clear. A stronger economy, lower public debt, higher investments, greater productivity, better infrastructure, a more efficient public service, more jobs, higher incomes, greater resilience, and improved living standards for every Fijian. That is the future this Budget seeks to build. That is why we remain confident and faithful with God's help that this is indeed "*A Responsible Budget for Sustainable Future*."

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, pursuant to Standing Order 99, the 2026-2027 Appropriation Bill 2026 (Bill No. 13 of 2026) has been read a second time. Without any question being put, the Bill and the Estimates now stand referred to the Committee of the Whole Parliament, otherwise known as the Committee of Supply.

Before we convene, honourable Members, I suggest that we suspend our proceedings for a break to allow honourable Members to stretch before we begin the long walk along the Committee of Supply road. Parliament is suspended and we will resume in half an hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 3.44 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.20 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now, as I have said, resolve itself in the Committee of Supply to consider each Head in the Budget Estimates. The process is expected to conclude tomorrow evening, after which the Committee of Supply will vote on the schedules and clauses of the 2026-2027 Appropriation Bill. For the information of honourable Members, we will go through the various Heads as far as we can today, until such time as the Chair deems it appropriate for the House to adjourn.

For the information of honourable Members, please take note that for the Committee stage, I will sit at the table with the Secretary-General and the honourable Members will refer to me as Chair. The mace will be placed on the lower bracket, signifying that the Parliament is in Committee. Honourable Members, as with the process and procedures, we will take note that the Secretary-General will announce each Head separately. Honourable Members may then speak on that Head and you may speak more than once on each Head.

Please take note that in some of the Heads, there will be several Programmes and Activities listed. I remind honourable Members that we will deal with these progressively and we will not regress or go back to the Programmes and Activities that have been earlier discussed. Honourable Members are reminded that you may move amendments to the Estimates under the respective Heads. If a Member moves an amendment, I will call for a seconder, and then the debate will ensue. At the end of the debate, the mover will have a right to reply and this will be followed by the vote on the amendment. All the votes on the amendments and the Heads will be through acclamation, as has been approved by the Business Committee.

For the further information of honourable Members, amendments are limited to those permitted under Standing Order 100(2), and these are an increase or decrease or removal of the item or subhead from the Head being debated. When there are no further amendments and debates, we will proceed to the vote on the Head, and then we will continue to the next Head. Please take note that the amendment slips, copies of Standing Orders 100 have been placed on your tables to assist you during the Committee of Supply stage. There are Heads 1 to 50, which we need to get through today and tomorrow. Therefore, I seek your full cooperation during this crucial process. We shall now proceed accordingly.

(The House resolved into the Committee of Supply)

In Committee:

Head 1 – Office of the President

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We will begin. Programme 1-1.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-1(8) – Construction of Executive Office and Administration Block. I noticed that there was a sum of more than $900,000 there last year and there is another $1 million for this year. Just for clarification, is this just a phase 2 of a programme that will be completed after the use of this $1 million, or is it because it was not completely used last year and this fund is coming in for this budget?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- That has been completed, and this is the new one, the old two-storey wooden building.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- My question is also on Programme 1-1(8). I just wanted to know, if that is the last amount needed to complete the whole work, or do we anticipate more funding to go towards completion?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Chairman, the $1 million is expected to be enough for the whole reconstruction of that wooden two-story building, which used to be known as the ADC flat and the office above the garage. This is the total.

Question put.

Head 1 agreed to.

Head 2 – Office of the Prime Minister

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-2(10) – Development Grant. I am interested to know from which institutions is this development grant is coming from?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- This one is an allocation from the budget, from the account. What do you call it?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- I am sorry, are we on Activity 1 now?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Chairman, you said SEG 10. Oh, sorry. She has gone to the next one.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-2(1) – Personal Emoluments. The increase in the emoluments, Oh, no, sorry, I am mistaken, it is a decrease.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, just a clarification on Programme 1-2(6) – Grant to Rabi Island Council.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We have already gone past that.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, I was trying to speak, but the mic was not switched on.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- What will you do?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Just seek clarification.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- I will allow the clarification.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- With regards to Rabi Island Council, with the amount of $195,652, does it also include the fishing licence for the villagers. They had to pay close to around $14,800 a year by themselves, so what they are actually requesting if this can be paid by the Council on behalf of the people of Rabi. If we can get a clarity on that.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- It is Activity 2(6) honourable Prime Minister.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Could you repeat that question again, honourable Member?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Sir, this is the clarification with regard to the fishing licence that is actually paid by the people living in Rabi of close to $14,800. What they actually asked to get a clarity on whether this $195,652 includes this licence fee, to be paid by the Council on behalf of the people living on the island.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Chairman, the responsibility for paying the fishing licence is up to the individuals. They have to pay for that. This fund is for the Council. In the function of the Council. So, I do not think that can be accommodated in this. It is not part of that.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Programme 2-1.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I am talking about SEG 7 - Former Prime Minister's and President's Benefit. Just want to know from the honourable Prime Minister, is there any plan to shift these funds to the Parliament so that Parliament handles it rather than the Cabinet Office?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Programme 2-1(7)

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Chairman, that is how the budget is currently structured and the responsibility there. But we, as Parliament, make the initial approval and the allocation is made based on that approval for it to be administered in the Prime Minister’s office.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- All right. It is clear. Honourable Members, can you kindly take note of Programmes 3 and 4 have been transferred to Head 11. If there are no further comments, the Parliament will now vote on Head 2.

Question put.

Head 2 agreed to.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Members, next Heads, due to the impending official engagements of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation and the Minister for Youth and Sports, I have agreed to bring forward to this afternoon the debate on the following Heads under their responsibilities, to allow the two Ministers to leave early, to attend to their official engagements.

We will turn to Head 38 and Head 25 respectively. As you have been earlier advised by the Secretariat, we will now deal with Head 38 first, followed by Head 25. Thank you, honourable Members.

<u>Head 38 - Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation</u>

MR. CHAIRMAN.- The floor is now open for any comments.

HON. J. USAMATE.- On Programme 1-1(6), I request a clarification from the honourable Minister on the Pilot Tourism MSME fund ($500,000), what exactly is it for and how it will operate?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Chairman, this is the third time that we have this MSME fund. We piloted it in the two budgets ago. This is the third time we have allocated this. It started off with $400,000; it is now $500,000. We have since established about 40 businesses over the last three years in tourism, through these MSMEs. So, we are quite happy with what we have accomplished through this programme. It is the first time that tourism has this programme piloted and it is working well.

HON. J. USAMATE.- A follow-up question, Sir, are these grants?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Yes.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Programme 1-1(6) - Tourism Fiji - Marketing Grant. Just a quick question to the Honourable Minister, which regions is the marketing grant covering this year for this financial year?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- It is in all our markets, but the vast majority will be on our two main markets. If I can read it out? Australia $4 million, North America $5 million, New Zealand $1.4 million, China, Hong Kong $2.4 million, Europe $183,000, United Kingdom $625,000, Singapore, $781,000, India, $934,000 in Japan $1.07 million. So, covering all our main markets, the established ones and the emerging ones.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- My question is on the direct payment which is listed there it talks about Fiji Tourism Development Programme in Vanua Levu, so I understand it is to do with the Navualiku Project.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Yes.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- So this year, $20 million is allocated. I just wanted to understand whether that money will go to Ministry of Finance and then the Ministry of Finance will disperse these funds, or how does it work?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Yes, the loan is negotiated through the Ministry of Finance. The other ones who hold the loans we are one of the implementing agencies: Tourism, Airports Fiji Limited, and FRA. So, we have a special team based in my Ministry here in Suva, and we also set up an office in Savusavu.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- So, if I may ask, how much of that funds so far has been utilised on this particular project?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- We had a budget last year that was fully utilised. For this, it is $20 million. Perhaps the best way to answer it is that it is a 10-year programme. We are now into Phase 1, and it is for six years. It is setting the foundation and implementing demonstration programmes and then you go into Phase 2, three to eight years and Phase 3 from six to 10 years. So, it goes over a 10-year period over phases. The learning from Phase 1, will determine how you go into Phase 2 and 3.

Mr. Chair, the thing with programmes like this is that people want to see tangible results right away, but most of the work right now is on feasibility studies, setting the foundations for the next two phases. There are some quick wins. We will soon be doing some solar for the Labasa Hospital so that they can have electricity on a 24/7 basis. Also, in Savusavu Town. We also have an MSME Programme for Vanua Levu that is worth about $7 million. That will be the winners of the awards should be made around August. So, those are quick wins, but to see tangible, you know, physical stuff, it will be in the second phase and third phase.

Having said that, we strengthened the Labasa Airport runway. That was a World Bank project. They could not take the full load of the ATR-72. The World Bank had strengthened that runway. So, we are getting that, people are saying, "Oh, you talk about 10 years, you talk about $100 million. Where is it?" The first phase is mostly studies and laying the foundation for 10 years.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Thank you, honourable Minister, for your explanation. We were also in the Northern Division. Our Committee was out there for Tourism Reports. We had a wide consultation with the stakeholders. We have not received positive feedback on this project. The concerns from the North are that the focus is more on things that we do not need. But the whole idea of this project is: how do you increase the number of tourists on the island? That focus is somehow or the other not there.

They are talking about beautifying the road and putting out the lookout points. They will also do some walkways. So, if we are going to use up all this money or, in fact, get a consultant to do a sort of work on financial literacy, I thought Fiji is well advanced in that area. If we are going to use this loan for such soft work, then how are we going to build the infrastructure?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- The discussion is outside the procedures as you distributed to us.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- She was seeking clarification. Is that what you are saying? It falls outside the guidelines?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- It is the money. It is a loan.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- If I can just answer that to honourable Premila Kumar. When we negotiated the loan, these components were clearly defined. The idea was to improve infrastructure, improve the airport, and tourist numbers would increase because infrastructure improvements would attract investment.

It is already happening in some sense. I know the tourism players want a chunk of that money for other things. We said that the Government will provide that. For example, those going on the other side, right up to Lagalaga, the Floating Island, the temple — they wanted attention to be focused in that area, but during the negotiation, the components were clearly defined. This included airports, roads, lookouts, and the rest of it. This is over 10 years.

I think there is a natural attraction to Vanua Levu already as a result of that project. That was the intention, you improve the infrastructure, you will get investors to invest in hotels. If Fiji Airways improves flight connections, if we improve airports in Matei, Savusavu, that is a natural attraction for tourists. It is a multiply effect, honourable Premila Kumar.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Yes, I do agree with what you have just said, but do not forget that there is Savusavu there, also Taveuni, as part of this project. The concerns were mainly raised in Savusavu and Taveuni. I will just stop here, but I just wanted to alert.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Perhaps Mr. Chairman, it is a good time to highlight these very important points. This should be the first World Bank project of this magnitude. We have to manage expectations. What is honourable Premila Kumari you are saying is what are you hearing? Some of them even want that money to go to them, but we are looking at a holistic, *Na Vualiku* Programme to uplift the whole of Vanua Levu, including training our people to be able to handle MSMEs.

We can put in money and development and be like other parts of Fiji, where people are not prepared to benefit from tourism and manage tourism. So, it all goes together.

For Savusavu and Taveuni, their feasibility studies for airports. There could be a new one. We will look at a new one also. We could redo or realign some of the specifics. Savusavu would take a bigger aircraft. Matei feasibility study, secure the land. And I think it is very important.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I just wanted to highlight this point because we do not want to end up like Exim Bank. I am just giving you an example.

The presentation was made by the World Bank to the committee. What we heard there and what we hear in Parliament are two different things. So, it is a concern, and I just wanted to flag it.

HON. V. R. GAVOKA. - You heard from the people or from the press?

HON. P. D. KUMAR.- No, from the presentation made by the World Bank team. What they told us and what I hear in Parliament are two different things. That is what I wanted to highlight, and we can have a discussion on the side as well.

MR. CHAIRMAN. - Can we move on?

HON.F. S. KOYA. – Mr. Chairman, I will forgo it because I think the Minister has actually touched on it already.

MR CHAIRMAN.-

Parliament will now vote on Head 38 - Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation.

Question put.

Head 38 agreed to.

Head 25 - Ministry of Youth and Sports

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Programme 2-1 - General Administration.

HON. J. USAMATE. - I think there is money allocated there for the construction of hard courts and upgrades of sports grounds. I am interested to know which sports grounds are covered here. My particular interest is in areas around Nasinu where there are no grounds, for instance, the whole Kalabu-Tovata area.

There is only one ground, and I have asked this a few times. Kalabu School ground everyone uses and there is no other ground. And when they do not have the ground, they play on the roads. We have rugby teams that play in the Nasinu, in Suva, training in this particular area. I am interested to know who these upgraded sports grounds are, and if Kalabu cannot be considered, how can we get it on the list?

HON. J. SAUKURU. - Mr. Chairman, there is an allocation of $300,000 for sports ground upgrade. I do not have the names of the grounds here with me, but I can always give it to you. This is to support the implementation of sports grounds in the new financial year.

There has been a reduction, reallocation of funding to SEG 10 to support Fiji Sports Council facilities with a new allocation of $1.75 million. I can always provide that information to you later on.

HON. J. USAMATE. - Would the Ministry provide upgrades for school sports grounds that are used?

HON. J. SAUKURU. - School sports grounds and other grounds as well.

HON. P. K. BALA. – Mr. Chairman, Programme 2, Activity 1, SEG 6, Drug-Free Sports Fiji, $405,000. Can the Minister explain how this allocation would be utilised? I think this is a new allocation.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Chairman, there has been an increase in that allocation for drug-free sports Fiji of $356,087 to cater for the operational costs of the drug-free Sports Fiji organisation. We are the first in the Pacific to establish our National Anti-Doping Organization(NADO). We are the first in the Pacific, no other Pacific Island has established its NADO.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We will now vote on Head 25 – Ministry of Youth and Sports.

Question put.

Head 25 agreed to.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Can I just revisit our process or procedure? When we go through the SEGS, I will go through them one by one and once we pass one SEG, you cannot go back to that SEG. I think that was established in last year's budget. We will move on.

Head 3 – Office of the Attorney-General

HON. J. USAMATE.- Head 3-1-1(7). There is money here for the Constitutional Review Commission. I was under the impression, I may be mistaken, that that work was to be undertaken this year. So, we can just clear up what exactly this $1 million is for.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Yes, this is for this year. As we understand, the CRC completed its first phase, the consultation hearing submissions, last Friday.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- SEG 7 on Workshop, Consultation and Conference ($100,000). This is a new activity that I see in this program. And while I hear from the Minister for Finance that he is getting rid of all these conferences and workshop and consultations and whatnot, but I see a new activity now. Can the honourable Minister explain why we have this particular conference listed only under Attorney-General's Head, that is Head No. 3, but not anywhere else. My question is to the Minister for Finance.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- That has been reduced, you can see, from $562,000 to $100,000. Even if they conduct their workshop, they can conduct it.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- No, that I can see, Minister, that is why it is written there, workshop, conferences and consultation. But you had just said in your budget speech that 10 percent of operational expenses, particularly workshop, consultation, all that has been taken off. But in this particular Head, I see this as a new item. It was not there before.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- No, it was there. It used to be $562,000, now it is $100,000.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Chairman, I am a bit confused. We have just heard from the Honourable Attorney-General that the work of the Constitutional Review Commission will finish this Friday.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- No, the consultation, 1st of September; the report will be submitted to His Excellency.

HON. P.K. BALA.- What is this $1 million for?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.-They are yet to be paid.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I am exactly after what the $1 million will cover. Obviously, it is the pay for some people; what else is covered in that $1 million?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- It is for the operation. We have to engage 20 lawyers from the Legal Aid Commission. Apart from that, there are some civil servants seconded as part of the Secretariat. Yes, and most of the work now will be done between now and 31st of August.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will vote on Head 3.

Question put.

Head 3 agreed to.

Head 4 – Ministry of Finance, Commerce and Business Development

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, on Programme 1-3(9) – Implementation of New Budget System, I note that in the last two years, the Ministry of Finance was allocated about $4.5 million and this year, another $500,000. I would like to know what is pending to be done? What has been the total cost of implementing this new budget system, and whether this is the last trench of money needed, or do we need more money to complete this work?

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- For the $500,000 for ongoing system maintenance, for the user training and refresher sessions for the Ministry as well as the other departments, implementation of system enhancements, strengthening integration with other Government Ministries, review and update user manuals, and to ensure the new budget system continues to support Government's financial management reforms going forward. So, we expect maintenance to continue.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I just had one on Aid-In-Kind – Millenium Challenge Corporation Compact Development (USA) ($24,5000,000). If the honourable Minister can elaborate on what that Millennium Challenge Corporation Compact Development is of $24.5 million?

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- The Millennium Challenge Corporation, MCC, is an independent U.S. Government agency that is partnering with us for some selected projects. It has selected Fiji as a partner for Compact and to develop Compact with them. We already signed an agreement with them, with an agreement for funding of around US$12 million. So, the Compact Development Funding (CDF) agreement is to support the establishment of a Compact development team, which is going to be here hopefully early next year.

HON. J. USAMATE.- A whole fund of $24.5 million is just to finance the establishment of that team. Is that all it is going to be doing?

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Yes. Establishment and carry out the due diligence that is needed for the projects that have already been identified, which are big ports.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, if the honourable Minister can explain Programme 1-4(7) – Establishment of Audit Committee ($5,625)? I thought this is going to be a massive committee, but looking at the amount, if you justify what this money is for?

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Sorry, which one is that?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- SEG 7.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Programme 1-4(7).

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- The fund is to support the establishment of a committee. In this regard, DFAT is assisting with the recruitment of a technical consultant to review the internal audit divisions processes internally with the Minister for Finance.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- So basically, it will be funded by DFAT.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Yes.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Sir, I have noticed that every year we are buying Fiji flags and the amount is around $60,000. I would like to know from the minister, we are spending every year to buy a Fiji Flag. Can we reuse these flags to cut down costs?

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Which one is this, Sir?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Fiji flags, SEG 5, just like we reuse our Christmas tree.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Yes, that is a giveaway. I do not think we can continue to reuse it every two years.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- So, you buy Fiji flags every year.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Yes.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Right, we will move on.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Can the honourable Minister please elaborate on the vehicle management system that $10,000 stands for?

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- That is part of Government's digitalisation plans to automate the current manual process that we have. The intention is to purchase the vehicle management system for the whole of Government, given that the existing system controlled by ITC has not been used since 2018.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Does that include the GPS, the tracking system?

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Yes it covers that.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Will it be internal or is it going to be outsourced, the tracking system?

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Internal.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You will note that Activity 8, Programme 2 has been transferred to Head 28. The Parliament now will proceed to vote on Head 4.

Question put.

Head 4 agreed to.

Head 5 - Ministry of iTaukei Affairs

HON. J.N. NAND.- The Turaga-ni-Koro Allowance. I visited a number of villages, the outcry is that some of the Turaga ni Koro have not received their allowance. Given their procedures, they definitely have to give the actual and other things, the return, but some of the Turaga ni Koro have not received the allowance. Are you aware of that?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, the *Turaga-ni-Koro* Allowance is paid every quarter. After three months, they will submit their reports. Once their report is received, then the payment is made.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- SEG 7.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Under SEG 7, the Apprentice Scheme - NEC of $10,000. The Apprenticeship Schemes are not covered by the National Employment Centre. They are normally done under the purview of an employer. I am just interested in what exactly that means - Apprentice Scheme - NEC $10,000.

HON. I. VASU.- This fund is allocated to support the Ministry's intention to engage graduate students and apprentices across various departments. These initiatives enable graduate students to acquire essential skills and practical experience before transitioning into permanent roles or addressing staffing needs within their chosen department.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We have an amendment from honourable Premila Kumar, and it is for Head 5 on Activity 2(7). The Head 5 increased by $200,000 in Activity 2(7), with respect to the National Action Plan Gender Based Violence Against Women. Right now, it is $8,000, as you read on SEG 7. See, honourable Kumar is making an amendment for the increased amount to $200,000.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I have to move my motion.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You are formally moving your motion, honourable Kumar. Is there any seconder?

HON. J. USAMATE.- I second the motion.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Sir, the current allocation of $8,000 allocated in the Budget, it actually sends the wrong message. Funding has steadily declined previous years from $30,000 in 2024 to 2025 Budget. Then it came down to $16,875 in 2025 to 2026 Budget and now to just $8,000 in the 2026-2027. So you can see there is a steadily decline in that amount. And my concern is at this rate, I will not be surprised if this important programme disappears from the budget altogether.

This reduction is difficult to justify when the Minister for Women has repeatedly informed Parliament that gender-based violence against women remains a national crisis. We have heard it so many times through her ministerial statements. She has reported that around two in three women in

Fiji experience physical or sexual violence during their lifetime, nine lives were lost to intimate partner violence in the first nine months of 2025 and that domestic violence costs our economy around $300 million every year, which is equivalent to 7 percent of GDP.

The Minister has also highlighted that over 70 percent of young men aged 18 to 35, normalise violence against women, demonstrating the urgent need for prevention and community education. The National Action Plan was introduced to drive meaningful change, not to become a symbolic policy supported by a ceremonial budget allocation that we can see today. So, effective implementation requires a sustained awareness programme, community engagement and behavioural change initiatives, particularly within our communities.

I, therefore, am requesting that this particular SEG can be increased by $200,000 so that the National Action Plan can be implemented effectively and meaningfully to deliver the outcomes it was designed for.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- The amendment is open for discussion.

HON. S. KIRAN.- Mr. Chairman, we have a National Action Plan on Prevention of Violence Against Women worth more than a million dollars working on 13 settings and the indigenous system is budgeted for as well. We also have the Institutional Capacity Development (ICD) of 14 Ministries and Ministry of *iTaukei* is part of that, and that is being covered with the New Zealand Government and SPC. So, we have covered in different budgets to make sure that different Ministries are covered. This budget is more the internal workings and awareness programmme within their ministry, but the actual infrastructure of indigenous provincial administrations are covered under other budgets. So, there is no need for increase.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- That is the clarification, honourable Kumar?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Yes, Sir. Previously $30,000 was given and gradually, we are seeing that it has decreased to $8,000 and for certain Ministries, it has completely disappeared which I will show later on because the Government talks about whole of Government approach to deal with this issue and, therefore, the budget was allocated for each ministry throughout. Even for the Ministry of Education, money was allocated, but if you go and look at Ministry of Education now, that money is not allocated anymore, so I just do not understand.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Chairman, to support the workshops for those participants from the *iTaukei* communities.

HON. S. KIRAN.- If I may add, Mr. Chairman, we have a specific, like I said, institutional capacity building budget that is from the New Zealand Government that will cover the 14 Ministries. So, we have a separate budget to make sure that we are building capacity.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- As stated by the honourable Minister for Women, we have the allocation in other Ministries and for Ministry of Women around $3.9 million is provided there.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, I think there is some level of confusion because on one hand we are saying that the New Zealand government will support this ministerial allocation; that is fine. You have reflected that, at least with some money in the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, but I do not see that kind of money reflected in other ministries. So, there is some level of confusion. It would be better if you can, just like in any other programme, it is written there that some aid will be given for the running of a particular programme, if that can be reflected in the future budgets because we have to account for whatever money is shown.

HON. S. KIRAN.- Sure.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- So, it is for this reason but based on her explanation, Mr. Chairman, I withdraw my motion.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Thank you very much, honourable Kumar. For SEG 7, the amendment is now withdrawn.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, SEG 7- Review of Village Guidelines ($20,000). We have moved around the country a lot and a lot of places that we go to, they bring up this issue of the Review of Village Guidelines. I assume this is the ….

(Honourable Member interjected)

HON. J. USAMATE.- I do not know, it says here "village guidelines" – is that the same as *Lawa ni Koro*?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We will find out from the Minister responsible. Can we have the guidelines, honourable Minister, or does he have to deal with bylaws or is it guidelines *per se*?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, in our review, it is village guidelines at the moment, and the Solicitor-General is doing the drafting. What we only need is, to have another Cabinet paper so that they can release the draft Village Guidelines.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Will you just clarify, is this the *lawa ni koro*?

HON. I. VASU.- Yes.

HON. J. USAMATE.- So will this then stop all those, because every time we go with Committees, villagers bring up, "we cannot do this because of *lawa ni koro*, et cetera." But I know in the village of Kalabu, the place I am brought up in is part of the village, we actually have a *lawa ni koro* already in place and already implemented. Hopefully, if this comes in place, it will clear all that confusion amongst the communities that we visit as we go on parliamentary visits. We look forward to it, Sir.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, it is part of the review.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- SEG 8.

HON. J. USAMATE.- The Village Improvement Scheme ($1.3 million), is this a competitive thing where villages apply, or is it pro-rata out to *tikina* and provinces? How does it work? Secondly, would it cover places that are now called settlements, that are part of villages but still part of settlements? How does it actually operate?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, this grant is on a one quarter, three quarters basis. One quarter is provided by the community and three quarters is provided by Government. During the financial year, every province submits its request, and all those who meet the requirements, they are the ones that will be assisted.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- SEG 10.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, I just wanted to ask the same question that has been asked for SEG 8 for the iTaukei Resource Owners Support and Development Fund.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Are you seeking clarification on that, honourable Koroilavesau?

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Yes, Mr. Chairman.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, this is the rollover from second and third-year subsidies from the 2025-2026 approved budget of $3 million. For new projects, this is the one where the additional $800,000 be given. The three are FDB, Merchant Finance, and most likely they will also request support from Home Finance with their low interest rates.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, just a follow-up question on that and further clarification. That means the list of resource owners that will be supported under this development fund is already established. No other resource owner can seek the fund because the fund has already been allocated for those who had applied previously. Is that correct, or can other resource owners apply for it?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, in each year, the banks will accept the request because we are providing the funds. This one is $3.8 million. For all those who apply must meet the criteria set by the bank. For most years, we do not fully utilise the amount that has been allocated because of the requirements by the bank.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- I understand that it has to be done through a normal commercial bank loan and then they put in their contribution.

HON. I. B. SERUIRATU.- Sir, can I just ask a follow-on question to the honourable Minister? This iTaukei Resource Owners Support and Development Fund is separate from the iTaukei Land Development allocation that used to be given previously? The reason why I am asking this is, again, we have spoken on a few occasions, honourable Minister, in the Levuka Town Hall meeting, the villagers of Vuma made a very strong presentation about their project. What is the difference between the two, honourable Minister?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, the other one is provided by iTLTB. That is 2.5 percent interest, with no deposit. This one that goes to FDB and Merchant Finance, with interest freeze for three years. We pay for the interest for three years.

HON. P. D. KUMAR.- It is on the same subject. I just heard the honourable Minister say that this particular fund is never used up. The uptake is a little lower.

HON. I. VASU.- If they fully utilize from the Ministry of Finance, we should be lending about $60 million on this $3 million allocation.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- At the moment, the budget is $3.8 million and I have just heard you say that it is not fully used every year. Is that true?

HON. I. VASU.- Yes.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- If that is the case, then why this year, it has been increased by $800,000 when we are short on the money?

HON. I. VASU. - Mr. Chairman, as I already mentioned, we have been dealing with FDB and

Merchant Finance. We are looking at going to Home Finance as well because the interest there is low.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- So, you will be able to use that money?

HON. I. VASU.- Yes.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Thank you.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 2-1(5) - Revamping and Preserving of iTaukei Lands and Fisheries Commission (TLFC) Records ($40,500), is that digitization in terms of preservation and revamping, or is it hard copy revamping and preserving?

HON. I. VASU.- This one is digitization.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, honourable Minister.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- On Programme 2-2(5) - TLFC Diaspora Programme, can the honourable Minister elaborate more on what this programme all about?

HON. I. VASU.- Funding and is to support the Division in conducting VKB Awareness Programme for the iTaukei Diaspora communities to strengthen their connection to ancestral heritage and land rights. Each initiative will utilize secure digital platforms and overseas roadshows to facilitate remote registrations and provide essential information on lineage and traditional entitlements.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 2-2(7) - Vola Kawa Bula Informal Sittings, what exactly is that?

HON. I. VASU.- Funding allocated to undertaking informal sittings at community level to raise awareness on VKB registration process. If there is a small dispute, there will be an informal sitting just to try and get the two groups together. If there is a difference in regard to the registration.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, I just wanted a clarification on Programme 2-2(7) -Transference of Registration (*Veitokitaki*). Can the honourable Minister explain what that is?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, in some instances, some were registered under their mother in the Vola ni Kawa Bula and when they were growing up, then they realized. That is where all the meetings, et cetera, will happen.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Just for your information, it is quite a complicated manoeuvring. I have been involved in one and it is quite technical and requires a lot of approval and agreement from the heads of *tokatoka*, heads of *mataqali* and everyone. I do not think we need to go there.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 2-3(7) - Survey of the Mahogany Plantations – Northern Division, I understand what this is and your part to that job is being done by iTaukei Affairs in the North. Is this the end of the programme? Will this now complete the survey of the *mataqali* land boundaries in the mahogany plantations in the North? If not, how much longer will it take?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, it will depend on the personnel that will be available to do this job, because they were given five years to get it done and this is their third year. They are quite in advance with the work that they are doing, hopefully, they can finish it by the next financial year.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, is it to prepare the area for logging or is it about disputes, particularly on over-planting or overlaps into other, maybe the honourable Minister for Lands can help in this as well. Because these are issues with the mahogany on disputes between adjacent *mataqali* land, the other one is over-planting, and the other one is just to prepare the area, confirm the boundary before logging. Because I know that there is logging now, or they are about to. Dreketi has started already, and other communities are also gearing up for logging in Vanua Levu.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, this is to address both the over-planting and preparing for harvest.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Programme 3-1(7) - Review of iVolavosa Dictionary. What I see is that in the last three years, the money has been allocated to the Ministry, and I am just wondering by when this work will be completed.

HON. I. VASU.- This will meet the expenses for review of *iTaukei* dictionary, where new *iTaukei* words or dialects are censored by language committee before publishing in the dictionary for public review. This also caters for the refurbishment of studios, sheds and cost of sponsoring Nai Tovo Programme on *FBC* Television, which is a short airtime video programme.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, I am very interested in this also in Programme 3-1(7) – National iTaukei Linguistic Mapping and Digital Archival ($86,462). Can we just have some clarification on that as well?

HON. I. VASU.- The National iTaukei Linguistic Mapping and Digital Archival Programme is strategically designed to bridge the gap between traditional culture, preservation, and modern digital governance, which is to be implemented in phases as follows:

- Phase 1 – Technical Infrastructure and Capacity Building;
- Phase 2 – Pilot Field Mapping (that is being done in Naitasiri and the Central Division);
- Phase 3 – Data Verification; and
- Phase 4 – Evaluation and Scale-Up Preparation.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Members, to note that Programme 4-1 has been transferred to Head 35.

Question put.

Head 5 agreed to.

Head 6 – Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, I have one general question, particularly on Programme 1-1(1) – Personal Emoluments ($2,482,298) and SEG 2 – Wages ($82,504). I do not know whether to direct it to the honourable Minister or to the honourable Minister for Finance. There are issues concerning civilians serving in the disciplined forces. The issue is, when there are salary increases in the civil service, they are claiming that they are not included in the pay rise. I am sure the honourable Minister for Police is also aware of this. There has been correspondences from the Police to the Ministry of Finance. What is the situation in the RFMF, honourable Minister, because they are not considered as service personnel, they are still considered as civilians, but they fall within the cracks.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, in terms of the allocation of the budget, it is not necessarily under Defence, even though the RFMF is under it, because RFMF has its own allocation under SEG 19. Nevertheless, in terms of clarification of what the honourable Leader of the Opposition is suggesting, that is true. Predominantly, the financial staff of RFMF comes from the Ministry of Finance; they are seconded there, and then they look after their own. There are also staff of the military who are civilians, now that RFMF also inducts their own, which RFMF then pays and looks after their welfare.

When RFMF's job employment exercise pay is upgraded, these people are also considered. However, I would be interested to know of these ones, because within RFMF, I have not heard of any case where people have fallen through the cracks, because they do not belong to either – Ministry of Finance or RFMF. That would be interesting to find out. I would be interested to know of this one, because within RFMF, I have not heard of any case where people have fallen through the cracks because they do not belong to either – Ministry of Finance or RFMF. That would be interesting to find out.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I am satisfied with that, but the specific question will go to the Minister for Policing concerning police when we get to Head 16.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman on SEGs 1 and 2, again a general question. What I realised as part of this, the Operating Grant of $15 million is transferred to the Aftercare Service Fund. If we look at emoluments, it is $2.4 million. The Ministry is left with only close to around $890,000. How is it justified to have such a huge civil service of getting close to around $2.5 million with wages added, just to cater for around $850,000 worth of budget? What are these staff doing in the Ministry?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, I seem to have lost my honourable friend. Is he referring to Programme 1-1 in terms of ....

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Personal Emoluments and Wages. It adds up to close to around $2.7 million; $15 million out of the whole head goes as a grant to Fiji Servicemen Aftercare Fund.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Which is on SEG 7?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- SEG 6. Is this fund also managed by the Ministry? If it is not, then the Ministry is only left with close to around $850,000.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- It is a bit of a tricky one, Mr. Chairman. The funds, whilst administered by the Ministry do not get allocated in the Ministry *per se*. There is an office that deals with the Aftercare Fund in the Ministry of Finance. We provide only two people. In the last budget, we were approved three additional people who are going to work now within the Ministry of Defence to look after the welfare of the ex-service personnel within the Division. Those are the only people that are dedicated to the ex-service people at the Ministry of Defence. Otherwise, they are a separate establishment altogether under the Ministry of Finance.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, that is what I am saying. If that fund goes to another institution, your Ministry is only left with $850,000 as operations, because the rest of the money is emoluments and wages.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- No, you are getting it wrong. The emoluments in SEG 1 are for those that work for the Ministry of Defence. In SEG 6, the operating fund for the Aftercare Fund is a separate fund that goes to them and out of that fund, are people that work for it.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- The grant that goes to that particular fund, that is fine. The people working there work accordingly with the $15 million. Personal Emoluments and Wages accumulate close to around $2.8 million. If you remove that $15 million from the $20 million, you are left with only $5 million, out of which close to around $3.8 million is just wages and leftover is only $850,000 or so. We are paying close to around $2.8 million wages to the staff at the Ministry of Defence just to manage $850,000.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- No, you got it wrong, mate. Sorry.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- I am not following the argument, to be very frank. I think the Aftercare Fund is looked after, as the Minister said, by two people or three only and that fund is to pay to all the ex-servicemen. It is quite separate from personal emoluments are to those serving soldiers. Am I reading this right?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Yes.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- The Ministry of Defence does not pay personal emolument under SEG 1, the funds that pay for the Aftercare Fund. So, there is Colonel Vananalagi there with four or five other people. They get paid from the $15,000 including paying out the money to everyone that they look after. These funds in SEG 1 that you referred to earlier is a $2.5 million, that is paying for just the staff of the Defence, which is everyone else from Intelligence and the whole lot.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- From that $20 million, $15 million is for the operating grant. The rest is supposed to be for the Ministry.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Honourable Minister, that I totally understand. If you look at the total budget, with regards to the $15.7 million, if we remove that, we are left with close to around $4.3 million.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Yes.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- The $4.3 million is for the Ministry of Defence.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Yes.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- We are just paying close to around $2.8 million as emoluments and wages. Now, the Ministry is left with an amount of close to around $800,000 to $900,000. What I am saying is, how come we are paying staff close to around $2.8 million just to look after a budget of $800,000?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is not the way to interpret it. If I can help explain it. This $2.8 million for staff, all civil servants are paid by the Ministry of Finance. The budget allocation is for each Ministry. But the actual effect of the payment into their pay cheques every fortnight is effected from there. Now, the other $800,000, you are saying that these people are managing $800,000, that is not quite correct. That is not how you interpret that. What I am saying is, they are there and doing other things. But that $800,000 is for other expenses, for example, vehicle and fuel. It does not translate exactly into what you are saying. You are trying to interpret it that way, but that is not how it works.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Honourable Maharaj, if you look at Special Expenditures, there are a lot of activities that those staff look after – Remembrance Day, Fiji Day celebration; that is around $700,000 already, so a lot of activities.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Basically, there are a lot of activities that needs to be looked after.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Yes.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Okay, thank you.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Programme 1,1(7). Can the honourable Minister explain what this Women Peace and Security Project is all about?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, this is a programme that is co-funded by the United Nations and also one of our donor partners. Its intention is to raise and advocate for women in the Defence Forces and also in the Police. We allocate these funds for the different programmes that are allocated particularly for women in peacekeeping and the training that we do for them in conjunction, of course, with the other partners that I am talking about. It is actually strengthening women's influence in command for both the military and the police and this is where we work together. It is a small amount of money, our partners include New Zealand, Germany and the UN. They fund all the other parts of the programme including conventions and workshops.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I have another question to the honourable Minister on SEG 7 – National Security Defence Review. You still allocate money? We already have the National Security Strategy. What further work will be undertaken by the National Security Defence Review Committee?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, this is essentially for the implementation of the National Security Strategy. Some of the significant taskings going on include the re-writing of the RFMF Act particularly the rightsizing of it and also the work surrounding the new RFMF legal system. Also, this includes our new peacekeeping strategy and generally really to see to the full implementation of the National Security Strategy that resets, particularly the RFMF and all other security sectors in a role that helps them to protect Fiji holistically. As I had already mentioned as part of my intervention yesterday, it is about how to assist the institution, particularly RFMF to be under civilian control and be a force in a democratic setting. Much of this is here, and this is going to be a lengthy process. This is some of the works we are doing now.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Members, note that Programme 2 has been transferred to Head 12.

Question put.

Head 6 agreed to.

Head 7- Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-1(5) - Digitisation and Implementation of Quality Management System, if the honourable Minister might just explain what that is all about.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Chairman, this is crucial for the Ministry to enhance operational efficiency and streamline processes through the automation of the manual processes. This transition will reduce the likelihood of errors and will also free up available human resources to focus on more strategic and value-added activities.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, I did not fully understand that. Is it digitizing things or re-orienting the process or what exactly are they doing?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Chairman, these funds will support the Ministry's investment in digitization projects which involve development, expansion and implementation of three critical systems that are essential to modern governance and will transform service delivery:

(1) Labour compliance complaint system - ensuring transparency and accountability in labour law enforcement;
(2) Case management system - streamlining case resolution and reducing backlog; and
(3) NEC Local Employment Registration, Phase 2 - which is connecting unemployed job seekers to employers through a dedicated employer-facing portal while generating vital labour market data and identifying national skills gaps.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-1(6) - Vatukoula Gold Mine Strike Settlement Cost, if the honourable Minister can explain if this is going to be the last settlement or there are amounts to be allocated later and how much we have paid?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- With the Vatukoula one, reduction is aligned to the payment which we made in the financial year. Six cases of $15,000 are left, that equals to $90,000; 84 cases of $24,000 are left, which is $2,016,000. The reason being that we are waiting for their probates et cetera to be cleared before we can identify the correct dependents.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- So this is something that is going to be clear in the next financial year?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Yes.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-2(5) Complains Administration Fees. What does that indicate? Is the Ministry actually paying for the administration of complains?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Chairman, this decrease is due to the Government's decision to reduce operating expenditure by 10 percent. So, it is reduced by $10,125 and the funds allocated for fee paid to obtain data companies for labour complains or inspection investigation. The office is now charged a fee of around $22 per company search from the Registrar of Companies. These are company searches undertaken by Divisions for the past six years – in 2019 – 129; 2020 – 91; 2021 – 71; 2022 – 90; 2023 – 150; 2024 – 40; 2025 – 101; and 2026 – 120.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- My question is, the heading of SEG 5 says it is Complains Administration Fees, which indicate to me that the Ministry is paying for these fees or is it an administration or a person that is?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- The company search fee, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You are happy, honourable Koroilavesau?

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- So the company that comes and complains, pays this fee?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- No, workers complain, we do searches and we have to pay.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Thank you, Mr, Chairman, I understand.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, on the same SEG.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You are in the same?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Same SEG, Sir.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- SEG 5.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Can the honourable Minister explain what is Expenses of Trade Disputes?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- This fund is allocated to meet the travel expenses related to negotiating trade disputes between companies. Funds used companies and workers, of course, trade unions. Funds are also used to conduct training with companies on how to effectively negotiate disputes as and when required.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-2(7) - Review of Minimum Wage. We all are aware that there was a review done just one-and-a-half years ago. I do not want any debate. As a matter of interest, when that took place, which years were included or it was only for that particular year and if these years were not included, how long will it take for this review and when will the report be tabled?

HON. A.D. SINGH.– Mr. Chairman, as I alluded to in my response to the Budget, this process will begin straight away.

HON. P. K. BALA.- No, Mr. Chairman, my first question was that we had a review just one-and-a- half years ago, and based on that, there was a report. So whether this year was included in it or not, or it was only for that period - one year?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- No, that was for that period.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Just one year?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Yes.

HON. P. K. BALA.- We spent so much money.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- We came into Government in 2022, we did the review in 2023, we effected the increases in two phases in 2024, and then this allocation is for another review.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Chairman, I am still not clear on that.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- We need to review wages every three years.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Unlike them.

HON. P.K. BALA.- I am very much aware of that, provided whether we can afford to pay or to have that implemented. My question is very simple.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- It goes through a process, Mr. Chairman, I just explained. The process is, we hire consultants, they go ahead and they make recommendations, and then the Employment Relations Advisory Board meets, which is a tripartite forum, and that is where consensus is reached.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Let me try for the last time. What I am asking is, we spent so much money just one-and-a-half years ago on the review of the minimum wage. Now, after one-and-a-half years, we are giving another $100,000 for the review; this is my argument.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I was going to ask about whether it was being outsourced. I think the honourable Minister has answered the process.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.– Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-3(6) - Workers Compensation is allocated $1 million and prior to that, the last two budgets, $7 million and $6 million were allocated. Why is there a drastic decrease in this allocation?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Chairman, it is $7 million to $1 million. The Ministry, between 2024 and 2025, facilitated 99 percent of the $5,999,160 of the funds allocated. This included 67 school accidents and 80 are yet to be paid from March to May 2025, with an estimated cost of $1 million. We are still clearing the backlog, Mr. Chairman.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Sir, perhaps, the honourable Minister for Finance will be able to answer better. My question is that last year $7 million was given for workers' compensation, this year it is reduced to only $1 million.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- The $1 million is to cover for the transition period, the enactment of the Work Care Bill by Parliament. So once the Act is passed, the Ministry will be able to pay from the ACCF Trust Fund. In future, we will use the ACCF Trust Fund.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Thank you, honourable Minister for Finance.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-4(5) – Formal Employment ($240,570). What does that cost involve?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Chairman, Foreign Employment and Mobility Services continues to promote foreign employment opportunities for the seasonal work programme and the foreign opportunities for the PALM scheme. Funds allocated is to meet the growing demand under the labour mobility programmes for Australia and New Zealand. This allocation includes the operational, logistics, mobilisation of the PALM and RSC workers, including cost of hiring of training venues, medical cost, and hiring of transport and venues.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- No, we can move one stage further - Formal Employment. The next item on SEG 5.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Chairman, this is the attachment allowance programme that we have repeatedly alluded to here. The weekly allowance of work attaché, $150 for those who are diploma holders and certificate holders, and $180 a week for those who are graduates. We also do skills training, participate at the Fiji Showcase, conduct job fair, conduct awareness for employers, and carry out visitations to different sites.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, the honourable Minister just said that they pay for the attachment under formal employment, so what is that Fiji Volunteer Scheme? I thought attachments was paid through the Fiji Volunteer Scheme.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Allocation for the facilitation of employment opportunities of local unemployed citizens for attachment with employers as part of their capacity building. Full-time employment, this is not full-time, towards full-time employment. This also includes cost of facilitating skills, training, et cetera.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We on Activity 5.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- No, Sir. I had said SEG 5 in Activity 4. But it is okay, Sir, you have already gone past.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Appreciate your sentiment.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-5(5). I always appreciate the work undertaken by the mediators in the Ministry. Just interested in what is covered by the money that is paid to the Singapore Mediation Centre of $73,370.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- The $73,370 is the annual contribution paid to the Singapore Mediation Centre. It has been there for quite some time because that is where we receive our training and also upskilling of our mediators.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, I seek clarification from the honourable Minister on Programme 1-6(5) on all these short form words – NMW Enforcement Cost.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- NMW is National Minimum Wage.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Yes, it should be written in full because the budget is read by everyone.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- The honourable Minister for Finance says he is responsible for printing this and point taken.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, I wanted the honourable Minister to clarify what SEG 7 in Programme 1-6 is – Asian Productivity Organisation Activity ($50,000)? Is that a subscription to be paid to that organisation as in Activity 5?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Correct, Sir. We were the Deputy Chairman last year as well. We are with APO and we benefit a lot more from training provided by them.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Just one general question, Sir. On this particular Programme 1-6, it is actually called Productivity Services. National Minimum Wage is not specifically a productivity service. The only aspect in that whole Programme that seems to be related to productivity services is the Asian Productivity Organisation. Is there anything activity that the Ministry is looking after in terms of productivity, because this was an issue that was brought up in our debate this week, other than these co-ordinating type of activities that are covered in this particular Programme in relation to the development of productivity in general.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Can the honourable Minister repeat the question, please?

HON. J. USAMATE.- I am not the Minister.

(Laughter)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- The former Minister.

HON. J. USAMATE.- What I am saying is, the title of Activity 6 is Productivity Services. Some of the things here - ILO Convention Expenses, ILO Subscription – that is not productivity. NMW not specifically, ERAB, the only thing that seems to be related to productivity here is APO which is a body and you said, we have served as its chairperson of that body.

Productivity is an important thing that we addressed this week, but this is the only thing that we have, things that seem to be ancillary to the concept of productivity. Now, I understand that productivity cannot be done by just one Ministry, everyone else. We had, for instance, I think one or two years ago, a National Productivity Commission. I do not know what has happened to it, but there does not seem to be any concerted drive to address that issue. Is there any plan that the Ministry to go beyond what is covered here in terms of looking at Productivity Services?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- We are in the process of establishing a Productivity Commission, tripartite, and we are also working on the decent work agenda. So it is going to go together.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote on Head 7.

Question put.

Head 7 agreed to.

Head 8 – Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 2-1(7) – Special Administrator ($540,000). It does not really have a proper description of what kind, where, who and what is it for.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Chairman, if I might answer that question, Sir.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Yes, you may.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- The sum of $540,000 (VIP) is to cater for all the operational costs of the military and police advisor for the Fiji Mission at the UN, and he is based at the Fiji Mission Office in New York. And the operational costs, honourable Koya, include personal emolument, FNPF contribution, post allowance, rental costs, medical costs for family, education costs for dependents, and any running and operational expenses. For those who are interested, the current MPA holder is Colonel Daunivakasala Ravunakama.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- *Vinaka.*

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 2-1(8) – Upgrade and Enhancement – Building (Overseas Missions). In the last financial year, a sum of $2.7 million was allocated to buy Fiji House in Wellington. So my question is whether that house has been bought or not?

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Yes, it has, Mr. Chairman. The older house has been sold and the revenue has gone back to the Ministry of Finance. The house was bought this financial year.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- It will be bought?

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Has been bought.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, just further on the Upgrade and Enhancement in SEG 8, it is only got a million dollars there, is it specifically for one mission, or which missions is it for? I only ask because we saw the state of what it is in the UK.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Chairman, through you, the Upgrade and Enhancement of the building is for the Chancellery in London. This is going to be done in five phases, so the $1 million is for Phase 1 for the next financial year.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Can I ask honourable Premila Kumar, she is moving a motion?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.-Yes, Sir, I move:

> That the allocation of $4,500 under Head 8-3-1(7) - Skilled Professional Evaluation Committee (SPEC) to be deleted or left out of this Head.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, I second the motion.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- The motion is that $4,500 be left out of Head 8-3-1(7). The motion from honourable Kumar that that amount or item be left out, and it is seconded by honourable Usamate. Can you please elaborate on your motion?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, the reason for this motion is straightforward. The Skilled Professional Evaluation Committee (SPEC) has effectively been abolished with the SPEC Act being repealed in December 2025. In April 2025, the Ministry of Immigration issued a directive that ended all work permit processing through SPEC and that directive was very clear. So if SPEC is no longer in existence, then the Parliament must know why public funds are allocated to SPEC, a body that does not exist.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- In terms of this, we prefer that it be left there. I believe that there are still related works in relation to that, together with the relevant Ministry and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Sir, again, there is an issue with honourable Minister's explanation, because SPEC was under the Ministry of Commerce and Business Development, which made sense. It is that particular Ministry that looks after business development in the country, they look after facilitation, and part of the facilitation Aftercare Services is provided by Investment Fiji. So part of the Aftercare Services that is provided by Investment Fiji, one of the requirements is, of course, to assist businesses if they need skilled workers. They are the ones who are dealing with this. I just do not understand why SPEC still appears, and strange, that it appears under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade when they do not look after the facilitation of domestic commerce or domestic businesses.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Thank you. It is related to trade, of course, in some form or another. So preferably we would like that to remain there for various reasons related to that kind of work.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- The girl that used to manage SPEC has gone to Trade, so I suspect it is probably some outstanding bills that need to be paid or something. Because as you know, as part of the scrutiny, they have to do a bit of work. It might be some of the outstanding bills that they have not resolved, possibly. It is a small amount, so let us not fuss about it.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I am still not convinced but let us move on.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Thank you. Then the motion is withdrawn now?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Yes, Sir, I'll withdraw the motion.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Thank you, honourable Kumar. The motion is no more.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- This is again SEG 7. It is the Review of the Fiji Trade Policy Framework. The last policy was from 2015 to 2025. Is the review on the verge of completion or is this going to take another year for us to have a new trade policy framework? It is just ongoing work? It is something that, a tool for our external trade and internal, obviously, so it needs to be done quickly.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- The framework of this budget will support the completion, finalisation and official launch of Fiji's Trade Policy Framework 2026 to 2036.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will vote on Head 8.

Question put.

Head 8 agreed to.

Head 9 – Independent Bodies

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-1(6) with respect to the allocation to the Fijian Elections Office, I see the allocation is for $23,242,546. Is this just to cover the elections? I understand there is an obligation on them with respect to referendums, et cetera. So, this allocation covers what is the question?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- My apology, Mr. Chairman, I was not listening.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We are looking at General Administration of Independent Bodies, Fijian Elections Office, page 65 of your volume.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Yes, what is the question?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- And it is specifically Fijian Elections Office - $23,242,546. Honourable Koya, can you just go over it again, please?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Sir. It is $23 million. The question is, what will it cover because the Elections Office has a mandate to cover not just elections, it will do referendums, et cetera, all that it is allocated to do under the Constitution. Is that allocation just for elections or is it allocation for everything else?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Chairman, it is for the Elections Office, whatever they are mandated by law to do. All the activities of the Fijian Elections Office.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- All?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Yes, under the current year.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Including the elections. The referendum is under Head 50.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Alright.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- So, the referendum is kept separate in Head 50?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Yes.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Sir.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote on Head 9.

Question put.

Head 9 agreed to.

Head 10 - Ministry of Environment and Climate Change

MR. CHAIRMAN.- A motion from honourable Premila Kumar. Can you elaborate on your motion?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, I move:

> That the allocation under Head 10 for the Implementation and Enforcement of the Environment Management Act under Programme 1-1(5) be increased by $200,000.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I second the motion, Sir.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Can you please elaborate on your motion, honourable Kumar?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, this motion is based on a simple principle. Laws are passed by Parliament and it can have very little value if the Government does not provide the resources to implement and enforce the laws. The Environment Management Act places significant responsibilities on the Ministry of Environment. This includes monitoring compliance, inspecting developments, investigating pollution complaints, enforcing environmental standards, prosecuting offenders and ensuring that Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) conditions are complied with. These responsibilities cannot be carried out effectively without adequate funding.
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Mr. Chairman, environmental laws are only as strong as the enforcement. If industries discharge waste into rivers, if developers breach EIA conditions, if mangroves are illegally cleared or if coastal areas are damaged, the Ministry must have the capacity to respond quickly and effectively. So, without sufficient funding, enforcement becomes reactive rather than preventive.

The additional $200,000 would strengthen the Ministry's capacity in several important areas. It would strengthen in the investigation, work in scientific monitoring and testing, enforcement and legal action plus compliance programmes. The cost of enforcing environmental laws is far less than the cost of repairing environmental damage after it has occurred. So, that is why I am opting for a preventative mechanism rather than the other way around. We believe that if Parliament expects Ministry of Environment to enforce the law, then Parliament must also provide the resources necessary to do so. For this reason, I have moved this motion, Mr. Chairman.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Chairman, through you, firstly, I welcome the increase. Although, to start off with, the Government as a whole, we are limited because of the 10 percent reduction in overall budget allocation. That means the Ministry will be sourcing from within or working with our line ministries, so it is an inter-ministerial approach. When you talk about the rehabilitation of mangroves, we work with the Ministry of Forestry as well as when you talk about companies that are breaching, we work with the Ministry of Local Government through the Councils. So, the compliance is spread across the board in terms of the implementation or the monitoring of this Act.

Also, Mr. Chairman, under Programme 2, we have an allocation as well for compliance. We would like to have more, but we will work within our budget because of the constraints we are currently facing. We are realistic about it, so we will work within the budget we have been allocated, along with other ministries that monitor and compliance as well.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Any further intervention from the floor?

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Chairman, my question to the honourable Minister is, in last year's budget, we had a....

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- My apologies.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Yes, I have heard what the honourable Minister has said, that she is relying on other agencies to help in compliance, I get that, but this is an Environment Management Act directly under the Ministry of Environment, and it is not just about mangrove management and all that. There is more to it when we talk about Environment Management Act. There are so many different components, and so much of work is required to be done. Just take, for example, Environment Impact Assessment (EIA). Whenever Environment Impact Assessments are endorsed, then environmental management work is required. Also, the conditions must be monitored clearly and carefully all the time, so that you can get the desired results. So, from that perspective, Mr. Chairman, I am not satisfied with the honourable Minister's argument. For that reason, I would like to go ahead with my motion.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Chairman, through you, there is a separate allocation under Activity 2(4) on Compliance and Enforcement - EIA. That is a separate allocation, honourable Kumar, since you have referred to EIA. Again, I reiterate, it is an inter-ministerial and a whole of government approach because even though with the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, we handle and facilitate funding, including external funding, the implementation ministries are across the board. So, they too look after compliance along with us to ensure that the Environmental Management Act is being complied with.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- That is why, Mr. Chairman, at the end, no one looks after the environment and that is why the state of environment is like this. So, I will still go ahead with the motion, Mr. Chairman.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- As stated by the honourable Minister, there are some trust funds too with the Ministry that they can utilise. It is just a matter of changing the terms of those trust funds.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Sorry, there is a trust fund?

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Yes.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- How much money is there in the trust fund?

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- You want to know? It is over $15 million or something like that.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- In that regards, if there is money sitting in the trust fund, that means the money is available for them to do that work, so I withdraw my motion.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Thank you, honourable Kumar, so the motion is withdrawn.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Chairman, in last year's budget, we had a SEG 7 for Small Scale Infrastructure Projects which is not there for this year's budget. Activity 1....

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Can I just go back? You are talking about SEG 7?

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Yes, Mr. Chairman. Last year after SEG 5, there was a SEG 7 under Activity 1 and it is not there this year for Small Scale Infrastructure Projects. Can the honourable Minister explain why that has been removed? Under General Administration?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Through you, Mr. Chairman, the Small Scale Infrastructure Projects is actually under Activity 3. There is one there where we have prioritized this year to have our own small scale laboratory that we asked for because we continue to outsource this service to the universities. So it is under Programme 1-3 - Implementation of Small-Scale Infrastructure Projects. So we have moved it to waste management because we are prioritizing waste management and pollution control services in the current year.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, Programme 1-3(4), you have a National Waste (Solid, Liquid and Wastewater) Management and Pollution Control Strategy. This would include, for example, something that has come up every year since we started this Parliament, the Nabukalou Creek. Does that strategy include the cleansing of Nabukalou Creek?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- The short answer is yes.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-3(7) - Special Expenditures. The amount allocated this year is $200,000 and previously it was $87,000, $112,000 was the maximum in 2025-2026. Can she just explain the increase?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Apologies, Sir. Which Activity is it, please?My apologies, honourable Member, what was the question? There is an increase?

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Yes. There is an allocation of $200,000 on Implementation of Small-Scale Infrastructure Projects (Laboratory). The amount has more than doubled. Can you just explain why that has been increased?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Chairman, through you, the establishment of this National Environmental Laboratory, which I mentioned earlier, is a strategic investment for the Ministry. As I mentioned, we have been outsourcing it to our universities, especially through Fiji National University. We need to have our own laboratory because of the need for a quicker turnaround in terms of testing. It has taken longer, so we need to have that turnaround quicker.

By having our own small-scale laboratory, we will able to test quicker, especially with any kind of water pollution or just really any oil spills, things like that happen, we have found that we need to move faster on the response time, especially in pollution incidents. So, we need to strengthen the Government's capacity to monitor environmental issues like that. It does help us, and thus the amount that is being allocated, we thank the Ministry of Finance for allocating this. This is one of our asks that we really need, so that is why the amount that has been allocated We do not think it will cover the whole amount, we probably will need to find some donors to increase its capacity. But to start off with, that amount will help us.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We will just go back. I skipped SEG 5, and I think honourable Koya, you had a question on SEG 5?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- No, Sir.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Sir, my question is on the Implementation of Fiji's Container Deposit, and there is an allocation of $45,563. I would like to ask the honourable Minister, is it to do with the policy formulation, or is it really to implement a legislation on Fiji's Container Deposit or is it just a programme? What is it?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Chairman, we have actually had a decrease in this budget allocation from last year, but the allocation continues to support the implementation of the CDRs. They will soon be finalized and the regulations will introduce the deposit refund scheme, which is already happening, as you know, like the return in an initiative, but then those have been done through the local councils, but we would like to see that go nationwide. The implementation of the CDRs regulations will help to be able to cover fees.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- So this money is to develop the regulation?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Implementing it, yes, and of course....

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Do you have the regulation?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Yes, it is still in process.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- So you do not have it.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Not yet, it is coming.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Okay.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-7(8) – Upgrade & Enhancement – Naboro Road. Is this road from the highway to the entry of Naboro Landfill or within?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Through your Mr. Chairman, it is within. It is a road that we need to upgrade to FRA specifications. It is used a lot, so we need to upgrade it. It is deteriorated because after more than 19 years of heavy operational use, it poses a safety risk, so we need to continue to upgrade that because it is under our Ministry.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, just a general question to the honourable Minister. Village Relocation Fund under Climate Change Mitigation, it does not appear here. Under which heading has it moved to? Is it now under Head 50 or under the Ministry of Rural Development?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Which SEG are you referring to, honourable Member?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- It is just a clarification.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- The Relocation Trust Fund is a separate trust fund. It is under trust. It does not come under the budget.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Chairman, the Relocation Trust Fund is with the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, implementation is with the Ministry of Rural, Maritime and Disaster Risk Management. So, our NDMO Unit does the relocation works. That is in Nabavatu and also one in Tukuraki during the honourable Leader of the Opposition's time. There are two others that will be coming up - one in Sawani, and one in Narata in Nadroga. In Sawani, there is a village there, Vuniniudrovu.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Again, it is paid out of the trust but not under the budget.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, I just wanted to have a clarification on Programme 2-1(5) – Annual Contribution – Asian and Pacific Centre for Transfer of Technology Governing Council. Can the honourable Minister just expand on that and explain what it is?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Chairman, this is a new budget allocation that caters for Fiji’s annual contribution to the Asian and Pacific Centre for Transfer of Technology Governing Council. The allocation will enable Fiji to meet its membership costs which facilitate access to regional corporation technology transfer initiatives, knowledge sharing and capacity building opportunities that contribute to our national climate resilience and sustainable development objectives.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 2-1(7). I sort of have the similar question that was asked by honourable Maharaj because I look through the allocations for Programme 2, are we getting some funding from other sources rather than government alone?

HON. MEMBER.- Pre-COP?

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- No, not on pre-COP. This is the biggest existential threat that we tell the whole world, but when it comes to resource allocation, we have just had our NDC submitted. I was there for the implementation of the NDCs, our National Adaptation Plan; are we getting some funds from other places? You have talked about the implementation of the Act and maybe I ask the question too about oceans. The honourable Prime Minister has made commitments in the Melanesian Ocean corridor because under the Act, we are supposed to have oceans monitoring networks, I just wanted to clarify this, if you can clarify, honourable Minister.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Chairman, as you have seen from last year, we have had the allocation that was more than this year. The parts of the Act that have entered into force last year is 13 out of 17 parts of the Act. They had been entered into force last year. Of course, we will use this allocation to progress operationalising the remaining four parts. I have the breakdown which I can provide for the amount that we have been given.

Importantly, we are getting funding from Australia and New Zealand to support the implementation of the parts. For example, New Zealand has given almost $7 million for the Climate Relocation Trust Fund, we were talking about it just earlier. Our development partners have been contributing to the implementation of parts of the Act but for this amount we have here, it is for the operationalisation of the remaining four parts of the Act. The EU has also given $12 million for implementation. So, it is work in progress and they are contributing to it.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Kumar?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- She has just answered that question.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote on Head 10.

Question put.

Head 10 agreed to.

<u>Head 11 – Ministry of Information</u>

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, I have noted that most of these news channels and print media, they have generally been given $850,000 each, like Mai TV ($850,000), Fiji TV ($850,000) and CFL ($850,000) but when it comes to *Fiji Times* and *Fiji Sun*, the amount is only $375,000 each. Can the honourable Minister explain why it is not consistent with the others?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Chairman, through you, first of all, there has been a decrease in allocation for PSB across the board, but as I mentioned in my budget response, it is really important to work with our media organisations to take out our community messages to the public because of their reach, especially online. For *Fiji Times* and *Fiji Sun*, this is the first time they are receiving an allocation, it was not in the current budget, so we wanted to include them as well in the allocations because the other organisations have TV and radio, they have a greater reach. For *Fiji Times* and *Fiji Sun*, it is online as well, but they are the print media that we rely on, so it is looking at their print media circulation for reach. Thus, the amount is less than the other media organisations.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-1(6) – Public Services Broadcast. On the same SEG, we can see close to around $1.8 million given to FBC TV and $1.8 million given to FBC radio. My question is, is this given as a grant and whatever broadcasting they will be doing, they will be getting a fee for it or they will cover everything within this allocation?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Chairman, so how it works is that, we produce the content together and then once they have produced and aired, then they send us their bill. It is not given entirely to them and they do not get that allocation right away. We have to agree on the content because it has to align with the nature of the PSB, which has to be community messaging, but otherwise, anything commercially related, that is their own to do.

HON. A.A MAHARAJ.- Is this SOP also applied to CFL, Mai TV and Fiji TV as well?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Yes. It is across the board, they do need to get the approval of the content through us and even the ministries as well. For example, if there are health messages, then the Ministry of Health also looks at it to ensure that it aligns with the message that the community message when it is sent out.

HON. H. CHAND- Mr. Chairman, FBC Radio has been allocated $1.85 million, whereas CFL only has $850,000. What is the reason for that?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Traditionally, as you know, FBC has the greatest reach. They also have the most amount of infrastructure, so they are able to cover FM and AM as well, compared to CFL. There are certain strengths for CFL, like radio, whereas FBC, it is FBC TV cause CFL, their core business is TV. So, that is a different reach and the TV stations have actually also gone online, so you know whether through *Walesi* or even their own online platforms, they are also publishing their TV online, so they have greater reach compared to CFL, which is largely radio.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote on Head 11.

Question put.

Head 11 agreed to.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We move onto Head 13. Head 12, the honourable Minister has excused himself, he is not feeling very well, so I have accepted, and he said he will deal with Head 12 tomorrow.

Head 13 – Independent Commissions

MR. CHAIRMAN.- The floor is now open for any comments.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Programme 1-1(6), Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- I apologise, Programme 1-1(6), honourable Kumar.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Can the honourable Minister explain why the budget for FCCC has increased and how will this money be used?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Minister for Finance, you have answer for them?

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Well for SEG 6, increase by $149,000, that is to cater for increase in Travel, Subsistence, Communication, Maintenance and Operation of their vehicles, plus Capital Purchase for their IT, however there is some decrease as well but the net increase was $149,000.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Thank you.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Sir. The reduction in the budget for the Online Safety Commission is to the tune of $362,000 in light of what is happening nowadays. Is there a reason for the reduction?

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Sorry Sir, for which one?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- The Online Safety Commission, reduction in the allocation.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Oh, sorry. Decrease of around $362,000 net. There were some increases, in telecommunication, fuel and oil. The decrease is mainly to marketing, public relation awareness, and capital construction or capital purchases. Some of this we will pay from this financial year.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ- Mr. Chairman, with regards to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, it seems like it is now an ongoing programme. When can we actually expect some kind of reports to be presented to Parliament? Because it has completed a budget cycle. If we are going to have any reports presented to Parliament on the work they have been carrying out?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Prime Minister, do you wish to respond to that?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- It has completed a budget cycle, so if they are going to present any kind of report for that financial year as to what they have done to Parliament, or will they actually complete everything, because it seems like it is going to be a lengthy process that they have actually involved themselves in.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Can I ask the honourable Minister for Women if she can help?

HON. S. KIRAN.- Honourable Prime Minister, with your permission, as per the Act they will be finishing the consultations around October and November then they finish the report and submit it to the President's Office.

Question put.

Head 13 agreed to.

Head 14 - Fiji Corrections Service

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, I just want an explanation on Programme 1-1(8) - Upgrade of LAN/WAN. Can the honourable Minister just explain on that, please?

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Chairman, the project will support the continued upgrade of the correction services infrastructure, the LAN/WAN from copper-based connectivity to fiber optic technology.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, just a clarification on Programme 1-2(7) - Rehabilitation Programme. Before, I believe it only use to cover the drug abuse. But now with drug abuse HIV is also very prevalent. So, does the Rehabilitation Programme covers, or are there?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- All inmates! Inclusive.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, I just want a clarification Programme 1-2-(7) - Ex-Offender Livelihood Support of $112,500 and the Yellow Ribbon Project $225,000, what is the difference between the two?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- I will start off then the honourable Minister for Finance can explain. The Ex-Offender Livelihood Support is basically provided to those who are released within the community. So, we go out in the community and give them farming implements from time to time. While the yellow ribbon is from within, going out. Generally those are the two.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, just want an explanation on Programme 1-3-(6) - Devo Heights Unit.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- That allocation is to facilitate payment between inmates trust fund. Inmates earning whilst working in the Devo Heights at a rate of around $2 per day for team members, and $3 a day for team leaders. So, the funds will be paid to inmates upon discharge.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Allowance?

Question put.

Head 14 agreed to.

Head 15 – Ministry of Justice

HON. H. CHAND.- Programme1-1(6) - Justice of Peace allowance, $600,000. Mr. Chairman, my question to honourable Minister, how many JPs and how often they are paid? Is it annually or quarterly?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Can you just simplify your question.

HON. H. CHAND.- The number of JP's and how often are they are paid, is it annually or quarterly?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Monthly and the number of JP's is actually on the website, I do not have the record.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- It is 763 JPs for the current financial year.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Thank you Assistant Minister for Justice. So, that is the answer the Minister has provided.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Chairman, my second question was how often they are paid. Is it monthly?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Yes.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, just a suggestion to the honourable Minister for Justice, since you have an Assistant now, if these people can be paid on time. They have been complaining of not receiving their payments on time. Going forward, if they can be paid on time.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Chairman, like the *Turaga ni Koro,* payments are activated upon the receipt of their return. But if you have any issue, you are more than welcome to forward it to the Assistant Minister and myself.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Sir, just listening to both the sides with their explanation, I have heard that 763 JPs are there. So simple calculation, 763 JPs x $100, that comes to $76,000 per month. If you calculate, it comes to about $900,000. Does that mean this amount is less?

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- It is because of the reporting process. If only they provide their report, then they are paid.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- But the allocation should be there, no?

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Yes, but now it is quite low at 32 percent.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Chairman, that is what I have mentioned in my speech, that payments will be made upon receiving of their reports. Currently the Ministry is also checking on all the records of JPs, so for those who are non-active we will take them out from our list.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- We budgeted $1 million, so, currently only 32 percent.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Chairman, thank you for giving the opportunity. I feel the question has not been answered. What honourable Kumar has just questioned is about 763 JP's multiplied by $100, multiplied by 12, comes to $915,600. That shows the amount in the money is less. I was in Nausori Market last week, having my documentation certified by a lady there, and she complained that they have not received their allowance. I did ask, did you submit the report? She said, “Yes” so, that is the failure of the Ministry.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Provide that record to us!

Question put.

Head 15 agreed to.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Members, we have now concluded voting on Head 1 to Head 15, with Head 12 to come back tomorrow in view of the honourable Minister's absence. We will now suspend the Committee of Supply until tomorrow. I will now resume my Speaker's Chair in order to adjourn the House.

<u>The House resumed:</u>

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I thank you very much for your participation. I said it was going to be a long walk, and it has proven so. Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of the sitting today. We will continue from where we left off.

Parliament is now adjourned. Please rest well and we will see you tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 7.07 p.m.