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Office of the Prime Minister

PARLIAMENT STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

A PUBLIC SUBMISSION – FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION AND OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE (VEITACINI

TREATY) Dr Lesi

Korovavala

Permanent Secretary, Office of the Prime Minister

Introduction

This statement provides an overview of the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union (Union) and Ocean of Peace Alliance (Alliance) from the Office of the Prime Minister's (OPM) mandate and role in their formulation process. The statement is presented in response to the questions posed by the Parliament Committee on Defence and Foreign Affairs, thus:

*a. the **Ministry's role and involvement** in the development and proposed implementation of the Treaties;*

The OPM was involved from the start of the process. It started with the PM indicating to the Australian PM in his speech at the National Press Club on 2 July 2025 that perhaps, in view of the maturity of relationship between Fiji & Australia that the Vuvale Partnership was ready to be elevated to treaty status. This was later followed by the PM's proposal in January 2026 for an Alliance to sit alongside the Union. On both occasions, the Australian PM did not hesitate to accept bot proposals. The Prime Ministers required both sides to conclude the negotiations by June 2026.

The PS OPM was Fiji's Chief Negotiator (CN) who also coordinated the Fiji team's positions and submissions. The CN role include the development of key concepts, principles and framing the approach, scope and content of the negotiation. These were shared with the Fiji team (comprising 12 Permanent Secretaries and 2 Heads of Agencies) and then discussed and eventually agreed with the Australian CN, Ms Elizabeth Peak.

There were eleven (14) direct one-on-one meetings between the CN and six Negotiation sessions involving both sides. Of these there were four in Suva, one in Canberra and one in Nadi. The first formal meeting was held in November 2025 and concluded with both sides' agreement of the final treaty texts on 22 April 2026.

On implementation, the Workplan comprise the key programs/projects and costs that will be undertaken during the first 10 years. Relevant Ministries will set up their project teams to oversee planning and deliveries of their projects. The OPM will track delivery through its Monitoring and Evaluation and Learning (MEL) function.

b. *the **key provisions of the Vuvale Union and/or Veitacini Treaty** that relate directly to the Ministry's mandate and responsibilities;*

Inspired by Pacific Leaders' declaration of our Blue Pacific Continent an 'Ocean of Peace'. We had called on states and non-state actors to align all engagement with the Pacific's vision for collective peace, security and prosperity – where we actively work together in the Pacific Way, through Pacific-specific and Pacific-led approaches.

The Union is a practical expression of that vision that is embraced by both Fiji and Australia.

The Union is premised on core values the two countries hold. Its purpose is to:

i. embed and operationalise the Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration as a cornerstone of our partnership;
ii. establish a Vuvale Union to enhance the Party's collective security, stability and prosperity; and
iii. protect and promote each Party's sovereignty and democracy and the solidarity of the Pacific region.

The Vuvale Union is not only for Fiji and Australia. Our ambition is that it is a tangible contribution to the Pacific family and provides a blueprint for the advancement of regionalism, unity and solidarity.

We live in an increasingly dangerous world and our region faces serious threats, including transnational organised crime, health pressures, strategic contest and the existential threat of climate change.

At its heart, the Vuvale Union bolsters our sovereignty and agency. It strengthens our ability to shape a shared future, in ways fit for the century. It recognizes our interests are intertwined and decisions taken by one affect the other. This is consistent with the underlying goals of the 2050 Strategy for the Bule Pacific Continent.

Under the Union, we will intensify our diplomatic cooperation, dedicate resources to tackle key security challenges and maintain peace.

The Union embraces the expanded definition of security in the Pacific Island Forum's Boe Declaration. As security issues are essentially integrity issues this brings into focus the bundles of areas that are central to the very dignity of our nations and peoples.

The Union and Alliance are guided by three principles: (1) partnership; (ii) integration and (iii) regionalism. They embrace the systems approach that build into the security and economic structures components to last centuries. The Union incorporates the targeted 6% annual growth rate to be a high-income state by 2050 (NDP and Vision 2050 and World Bank Assessmment 2025).

On the defence side, in the late 70s and early 1980s, there were only one or two officers on training in Australia. Today composite companies engage in annual regional

trainings with officers embedded in each other's armed forces to strengthen capability, interoperability and professionalism. On military doctrine, ethics and tactics, the RFMF uses the Australian Defence Force Manual of Warfare.

The Veitacini Alliance fully recognizes the sovereignty of the Parties and maintains open lines of communication. This Alliance only applies to our region.

The OPM has the responsibility of oversight over government policies and the delivery system. This oversight role is informed by hindsight, insight and foresight. The role of oversight in driven by stewardship.

The issue of sovereignty and integrity require that Fiji hold its own and stands on its values and credibility. Partnership means that Fiji will meet its own share of the cost relative to its capacity.

Critical in this space is the ability to sustain the government's goals for the longer-term as outlined in the NDP and Vision 2050 – thus the inclusion of the economic pillar in the treaty.

Supporting this goal is the emphasis on the economic structure. The structural approach ensures that the system, its capacities and outcomes, provide meaningful and consistent outcomes over the years. Capacity building aims at the government's target of 6% annual growth rate by 2030 and beyond.

The inclusion of economic security brings into focus critical infrastructures, health (including HIV/Aids), education, workers and jobs, migration, development, trade, and investment within the broader structures of our economy. This will make communities in both our countries safer and more resilient.

While the 2025 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent talks about cooperation, at the heart of Strategy is integration. PIF Members are expected to share cultural, intellectual, economic, security spaces while required to safeguard and respect each others' sovereignty. The Union and the Alliance has structured this through a systemic and structural approach, by way of integrating the systems. These systems can communicate and interact at the business level while each Party defers to the sovereign decisions taken through each others' domestic processes remain fully safeguarded and respected.

*c. the **existing and proposed areas of Fiji-Australia cooperation** within the Ministry's portfolio and how these may be strengthened under the Treaties;*

First, new commitments under the Union and the Alliance are additional to existing support under the Vuvale Partnership.

Second, in view of the multiplicity of Ministries and agencies involved, the OPM is responsible for coordination, tracking and reporting of deliveries through its MEL function.

Third, both governments agree that as the Union and the Alliance are giving practical expression to the region's Ocean of Peace Declaration it is prudent that the Ocean of Peace Centre is located at the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.

In view of the foregoing, the OPM will be working with the PIF Secretariat, and the Australian government to setting up the Ocean of Peace Centre – terms of reference, structure, resourcing, delivery, monitoring and reporting.

*d. the Ministry's responsibilities under the proposed **10-Year Work Plan**, including key initiatives, priorities and expected outcomes;*

The OPM will undertake its oversight role under the MEL function, working with and through Ministries and the Ocean of Peace Centre i.e. stewardship, tracking and monitoring. Both Parties understand that security situations are never static; that the situation will change in both intensity and kind. The 'living' feature of the Union and the Alliance allows both Parties to consider and take considered measures to common challenges and responses.

*e. the **anticipated benefits and opportunities for Fiji** arising from the Treaties within the Ministry's respective sector;*

There is no other higher act of trust than a treaty where two countries committing to stand together to face common challenges and develop common responses to meet those challenges.

At the centre of our consideration is Fiji's status as the regional hub. Everything that accrues to Fiji in this treaty is also for the benefit of the region – be it in education, health, infrastructure, digitalisation, aviation, environment, transnational organised crime, law enforcement, defence, cybersecurity, migration, or maritime domain. Such is the recognition of Fiji's stewardship role in Oceania and the Indo-Pacific region.

Emerging challenges will increase in intensity thus no one country can address, let alone resolve these on their own thus the regional approach. The system and structural approach were adopted to seek measures that were realistic and longer term.

*f. any **legislative, policy, regulatory, institutional or administrative requirements** necessary to give effect to the relevant commitments;*

The undertakings in the Union and the Alliance work from existing policy, legislative and regulatory frameworks, systems and structures. The newly reviewed legislations like the
Police and Immigration Acts already incorporated scenarios that the Union and the Alliance envisaged. Work toward modernising the Defence Act, cybersecurity, and decoding the UNCLOS to enable multiple agencies to co-operate in joint and combine operations will further enhance coherence, agility and credibility of responses. Sharing of information is a key area of cooperation for successful bilateral and regional efforts.

For the first time, the security architecture of the Union incorporates religious and traditional leaders in its decision making in its Vuvale Talanoa and Vuvale Bukmak.

*g. any **financial, staffing, infrastructure, capacity-building or other resource implications** associated with implementation; and*

It is noted that the assistance in the Vuvale Union Work Plan is additional to ongoing support under the Vuvale Partnership. The Australian government has offered $1.5 billion to support the Work Plan in the next 10 years. The Work Plan is a living document and will take on board emerging issues and considerations, so it is receptive to new inputs, thus responding to realities in real time for years to come.

Fiji will continue to resource its commitments under the usual budgetary allocations thus providing the bases on which treaty activities will be built and improved.

Existing structures like the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Partnership's Maritime Emergency Services Centre (MESC), already provides a platform to serve the region as a coordination centre.

The Vuvale Union and the Veitacini Alliance are intended to run indefinitely.

On transformative initiatives, the Vuvale Union work plan focused on:

i. **Tackling the transnational crime, drugs and HIV crisis** – through a step change in law enforcement cooperation and enhancing Fiji's maritime domain awareness, hospitals, health and medical services.

ii. **Boosting economic growth and security** – through guaranteed budget support, financing for key economic infrastructure, support for the digital transition and Fiji's diversification agenda.

iii. **Developing circular mobility** – with stronger border security enabling enhanced visa settings.

iv. **Driving ambitious climate action** – starting by bringing the world's attention to the climate crisis at this year's pre-COP and leveraging that in support of greater resilience for communities and people.

v. **Revitalising regionalism** – through an Ocean of Peace Centre promoting Pacificspecific and Pacific-led solutions to the region's security challenges.

vi. *any **key issues, risks or challenges** that the Ministry considers the Committee should take into account in its consideration of the Treaties.*

Fiji recognises democracy as the one thing without which all things cannot hold and Fiji's position in the Vuvale Union, Veitacini Alliance and among the community of nations will be jeopardised.

i. The obligations both Parties commit to is no different from those the two Parties have been undertaking since WW1. The Alliance therefore formalises this partnership in a way that recognises each other as equals based on values including respecting sovereignty, democracy, and the rule of law, key tenets of the modern Fiji and the Pacific islands Forum.

ii. The Alliance recognises and affirms the commitment between the Parties to protect their sovereignty, secure their mutual defence and security interests and contribute to the stability and security of the Pacific.

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[VERBATIM REPORT]

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

UNION/TREATY

(1) FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION
(2) OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE (VEITACINI TREATY)

ENTITY: Office of the Prime Minister
VENUE: Big Committee Room (East Wing)
DATE: Tuesday, 1st September, 2026

VERBATIM REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE HELD AT THE COMMITTEE ROOM (EAST WING), PARLIAMENT PRECINCTS, GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, ON TUESDAY, 1ST SEPTEMBER, 2026, AT 2.45 P.M.

Present

Hon. L.S. Qereqeretabua	-	Chairperson
Hon. R.R. Sharma	-	Deputy Chairperson
Hon. I. Tuiwailevu	-	Member
Hon. P.K. Ravunawa	-	Member
Hon. T.R. Matasawalevu	-	Member
Hon. V. Lal	-	Member

Interviewee/Submittee: Office of the Prime Minister

In Attendance:

Dr. Lesi Korovavala	-	Permanent Secretary

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- The Permanent Secretary for the Office of the Prime Minister, Dr. Lesi Korovavala, honourable Members; *ni sa bula vinaka,* and those of you watching this Committee meeting live; a very good afternoon. Pursuant to the Standing Orders of Parliament, specifically Standing Order 111, all Committee meetings are open to the public and to the media, and so this submission meeting is open to the public and to the members of the media.

If there is any sensitive information relating to this submission that cannot be disclosed publicly, such information may be provided to the Committee either in writing or in a closed session. However, this will only be permitted in limited circumstances, including the following:

- matters relating to national security;
- third party confidential information;
- personnel or human resource matters; and
- during the Committee's own deliberation.

I wish to remind all honourable Members and witnesses that all comments and questions should be directed through the Chair, and for viewers following this meeting live on *Facebook*, if you have any questions, you may submit those via the comments section. Please, note that only relevant questions will be considered by the Committee. Members of

the Committee may also interject during the submission. Alternatively, you can ask your questions at the conclusion of the presentation.

I also want to remind everyone that this is a parliamentary proceeding. All information provided is protected under the Parliamentary Powers and Privileges Act 2016 and the Standing Orders of Parliament. Slander or libel of any kind will not be condoned and all information presented to the Committee should be factual.

In terms of meeting protocols, movement within the meeting room should be kept to a minimum, please, and the usage of mobile phones is discouraged. All mobile phones should be placed on silent for the duration of this meeting. I thank you for your understanding.

Dr. Korovavala, you have already met the Members of the Committee but then, also are sitting to your extreme left is Nirupa from our Hansard and this is, of course, Tiri, from our Secretariat.

Today, the Committee is receiving an in-person submission from the Office of the Prime Minister in relation to the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance or Veitacini Treaty, that are currently before this Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence.

I now invite Dr. Lesi Korovavala to, again, introduce himself and proceed with the Office of the Prime Minister's submission. Sir, we are going to give you 15 minutes for your opening statement, and we do have a whole list of questions for you, Sir. I also ask honourable Members to remember to, please, turn off your microphones because we do hear noise coming across from Albert Park during this Hibiscus Festival.

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- Mr. Chairman and honourable Members, I have the honour to represent the Office of the Prime Minister at this Parliamentary Standing Committee session this afternoon. I had provided a written brief, but you might see that the script is slightly different from the one that we see, but it is talking to the same points.

The honourable Prime Minister's vision was adopted by the Pacific Leaders' declaration of our Blue Pacific Continent as an Ocean of Peace, that further inspired the formulation of the Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance to give it practical expressions. We had called on States and non-State actors to align all engagement with the Pacific's vision for collective peace, security and prosperity where we actively work together in the Pacific way through Pacific led approaches for Pacific specific solutions.

The Vuvale Union is not only for Fiji and Australia - our ambition is that it is a tangible contribution to the Pacific family and, hopefully, provides a blueprint for the advancement of regionalism, unity and solidarity. At its heart, the Vuvale Union bolsters our sovereignty and agency.

It strengthens our ability to shape a shared future in ways fit for the century. It recognises that our interests are intertwined, and decisions taken by one affect the other. This is consistent with the underlying goals of the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.

The Vuvale Union is guided by three principles - partnership, integration and regionalism. The Union embraces the systems approach that built into the security and economic structure components to last centuries.

The Union incorporates a targeted 6 percent annual growth rate to high income States by 2050. It has three pillars - security, economy and people. For Fiji, negotiations was led by the Office of the Prime Minister, and I acknowledge with appreciation the contribution and tenacity of the 10 Permanent Secretaries, the Commander of the RFMF and the Commissioner of Police, who were directly involved.

On the direction of the Prime Minister, we worked to finalise the Draft Treaty Texts by June 2026. Since it started in November 2025, the negotiations were completed on 22nd April, 2026. For the first time, religious and traditional leaders are included in the Vuvale Talanoa and the Vuvale Bukmak architecture of the Union. *Bukmak* is an Aboriginal word which means, "everyone". These are key voices in the leadership and stewardship of the *Vanua* and its people, key representations of such an important issue.

Kindly note that assistance in the Vuvale Union Workplan is additional to ongoing assistance under the Vuvale Partnership. We acknowledge with appreciation the support of the Australian Government. Their commitment to budget support and the resourcing of key programmes is telling.

The Workplan will take on board emerging issues and considerations, so it is receptive to new inputs, thus responding to realities in real time for years to come.

Together, the two countries will invest in relationship resources to implement the treaty to:

(1) Scale up capability to combat transnational organised crime.
(2) Enhance Fiji's health system, including our response to the HIV crisis.
(3) Enhance economic security by financing port development, climate infrastructure, investment in critical infrastructure and supply chain resilience.

(4) Strengthen people development through education, sports and enhance visa arrangements.

Many of these, if not all, have wider benefits for the region. This is a role that Fiji will continue to play for the region in view of its location and status. This, however, comes with responsibility. In a way, the union and the alliance enables Fiji to make good on this regional status and role, to think and act as a hub.

Fiji and Australia's Cabinet has agreed on a 10-year workplan. It includes both financial commitments and policy work. Vuvale Union is in addition to existing bilateral work. As announced by Prime Minister Albanese in July, Australia's Vuvale Union commitment is of $1.5 billion. That comprises $1.05 billion in grants and $550 million in loan, representing approximately a doubling of Australia's commitment to Fiji.

Fiji and Australia have agreed to work together in implementation. The Treaty includes a ministerial level forum and Senior Officials Bukmak, which I have referred to already, which draws on the faith leaders, traditional leaders, community and business groups. This is the first time such voices have been brought formally to such a level.

Australia and Fiji have a proud history of standing shoulder to shoulder to support each other at the region's security and have existing defence cooperation. There is no greater signal of trust between two countries until they come to a treaty.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was only one or two Military Officers on training in Australia. Today, composite companies engage in annual regional trainings with officers embedded in each other's armed forces to strengthen capability, interoperability, and professionalism.

On Military doctrine, ethics, and tactics, the RFMF uses the Australian Defence Force Manual of Warfare. Australia is currently undertaking its own parliamentary processes with the intention to be ready for entry into force before the end of the year, as we do. I offer some words on key Australian commitments under the Union and Alliance:

(1) $284 million to strengthen the fight against transnational crime and illicit drugs. This includes a commitment to build a new police headquarters, with construction to begin after the Treaty entering into force, with the Australian Federal Police Engineering Team, who were in Fiji last week, to undertake scoping work.

(2) Partnership with Fiji as a regional leader and regional responses, including the *Waqa Moana*. Expect announcement on support for this work following the Pacific Islands Forum discussions on regional responses, including to support defence and police cooperation.

(3) Support law reform and legislative drafting capacity, including through deploying additional Australian Officers to work with counterparts in Fiji.

(4) $158 million on health, including to respond to HIV, support a new national hospital, and strengthen health systems.

(5) Although the Treaty is not yet in force, Australia has been able to front-load some *Vuvale* support through the provision of $23.5 million for their HIV responses as announced at the HIV headquarters by Foreign Minister Wong in August.

(6) Commitment is just not financial. This month, Australia's Chief Medical Officers visited Fiji to share Australia's experiences in addressing HIV.

(7) Grant funding to support a new hospital, including to leverage funds from other partners.

(8) $228 million in grant and $550 million in loan on nation building infrastructure. Agreed priorities include maritime infrastructure and climate adaptation. This dovetails with existing work underway on shipbuilding and ship repair and builds on pre-COP climate action with adaptation and renewable energy projects for remote communities.

(9) Yesterday, the Australian High Commissioner agreed to begin feasibility work with the Ministry of Public Works and Ministry of Strategic Planning on port infrastructure.

(10) $146 million in digital transition, this is the upgrade of digital infrastructure in Fiji, including the existing data centre, to support Fiji's work on digital Government services in line with Fiji's national strategy.

(11) Support hardening of cyber security and cooperation on AI.

(12) Expanded skills programme for in-country IT needs.

(13) $35 million in additional sports partnership. Following discussion between honourable Prime Minister Rabuka and the Australian Prime Minister Albanese, Prime Minister Albanese announced direct support to the Drua in August - the exact amount will be made public later, as broader cooperation priorities will be agreed between Fiji and Australia.

(14) Over $48 million on economic security and economic diversification, which includes commitment to support high-value agriculture and agri-processing.

(15) Cooperation on standards and market excess. The High Commissioner announced at the Fiji Business Council Conference over the weekend that Standards Australia would increase their cooperation of Fiji's Department of National Trade Measurement and Standards under the Vuvale Union.

(16) Support for supply chain resilience including Fiji as a regional hub for more robust critical infrastructure and investment screening.

(17) $87 million for a package on circular mobility and building skills. This is to enhance skill mobility. After entering into force of the Treaties and regulatory changes, Fijians will be eligible to apply four months visa stays and business visas will be eligible to apply for fiveyear multi entry visas.

(18) Expanded skills partnership, include a new focus on digital skills and maritime skills that are rare and needed in Fiji. Prime Minister Albanese launched in Fiji the Pacific Australia Skills Programme, including the Vuvale Skills Hub in Walu Bay.

(19) The Fiji National University is signing today an MOU with the Australian Maritime College on maritime skills training.

(20) A new border management system for smoother entry and exit but greater information sharing, security and intelligence.

(21) Meetings with Fiji's Ministry of Education to implement this project with the Project Team occurring next week. A new Vuvale Education Partnership from 2029 and 2030, a select cohort of Fijian students, will be able to access Australian universities on the same conditions as Australian students. They will be treated as local students in Australia. This is the first time Australia has offered such access, and has committed to enact regulatory changes to enable this.

(22) $39 million to establish the Ocean of Peace Centre in conjunction with the Pacific Islands Forum and regional partners to promote Pacific-led solutions to regional challenges. We expect the Ocean of Peace Centre to be established at the PIF Secretariat. We foresee the Centre will monitor the implementation of the Vuvale Union and the Veitacini Alliance. This has been discussed through the Forum processes, and we look forward to working with the PIF Secretariat to give shape to the Centre's mission and structure.

(23) $15.5 million to support stronger culture and faith-based links and exchanges.

Madam Chairperson and honourable Members of the Committee, the key is in delivery, tracking and learning, to which the Office of the Prime Minister will continue to undertake under its oversight role in the monitoring, evaluation and learning function. As we know, peace is not a given, we are not here just to occupy space. Expressions of trust like this do not sit on itself. Democracy is the vital ground upon which these Treaties and Fiji's place among the community of nations will hold true. Without it, we lose credibility and our place.

Madam Chairperson, I thank you.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you very much, Dr. Lesi Korovavala, Permanent Secretary in the Office of the Prime Minister. Dr. Korovavala, if you do not mind what we might do, the Committee has organized ourselves and we will ask you questions, first, based on the FijiAustralia-Vuvale Union Treaty, and then we will go to the questions pertaining to the Ocean of Peace Alliance - the Veitacini Treaty. If that is alright with you, Sir, I will open the floor now to the honourable Members to ask questions.

HON. V. LAL.- Madam Chairperson, thank you so much for the opportunity and Dr. Korovavala, thank you so much for your presentation. I know it has been quite a mouthful, but I can see that the agreement was negotiated in confidence following a proposal from the Government of Fiji, and the Office of the Prime Minister as the chief negotiator, I would like to know whether there were any consultations done here? I know there has been some consultations in Australia, but on our part, has there been any consultations done here locally?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- Madam Chairperson, from the word go, we mobilized ourselves, the respective Ministries that have inputs into the Union, as well as the Alliance. We developed the concepts, we worked on the principles, and we agreed on the position that Fijian has taken. We scoped and framed the content and the reach of the Union, as well as the Alliance.

When we have established our position, then we went across to discuss with our Australian counterparts. Yes, at every stage of work. The six negotiations were about three weeks apart from each other. And every time we consult, we receive a presentation from each of the Ministry and sectors. What are their positions? What are their desires? What are their

goals? What do they want to see to be achieved from this framework? These were subjected to the views of the legal minds in the Government.

After that, then we had our sessions with our Australian counterparts. There were 14 face-toface or one-on-one discussions with the lead negotiator for the Australian side, where we discussed the concepts, the key ideas, and how we framed the negotiation, as well as the content and scope of the frame.

HON. V. LAL.- Madam Chairperson, you did consult the stakeholders and, especially, you mentioned about the 11 Permanent Secretaries. What about the Fijian public?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- As a process, we did not go out to the public. We relied on the work of each Ministry that they were the ones in touch with their stakeholders, and they got a feed on the inputs from their respective sectors.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Dr. Korovavala, I have a question, and this is still on the FijiAustralia Vuvale Union Treaty. Under Article 4(3), and I quote, "...the parties declare that a thirdparty military or other security base, ongoing presence arrangements or visits could threaten or undermine collective security." My question is, how will this provision restrict Fiji's sovereign right to independently manage its security arrangements, its police training, or port visits with other global powers?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- One of the things that the Treaty recognised all along was that both parties have a sovereign right to their position. The approach to the formulation of both the Union and the Alliance was based on values, and particularly for Fiji, the democratic values that it has. Those were the guiding platforms from which we approach every issue.

We recognise that for the Pacific and the Pacific way to hold, we need to remain true to these values. We work from the basis of the Ocean of Peace Declaration where the Leaders have already adopted those set of 12 principles. Those are the principles from which we work from. In that understanding, we approach all the issues and what might be third-party engagements in the Pacific. That was how it was approached.

There were some issues about how the sovereignty of each of the party might be challenged, in some cases, or threatened if we put it anyway. The basic assumption is that the definition of sovereignty is the same throughout, but it is not. For Fiji, we understood what our sovereignty means, what our identity as a country means, as our people, and those are the basis of the values on which we approach this negotiation.

HON. I. TUIWAILEVU.- Dr. Korovavala, my question is on Article 3(7). Will this enhanced mobility setting result in genuine visa facilitation or visa-free entry for Fijian citizens visiting Australia, or will it be strengthening its focus primarily on security barriers and border control that restrict Pacific travellers?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- Would you be able to read Article 3(7), please?

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Would you mind reading the Article, honourable Tuiwailevu?

HON. I. TUIWAILEVU.- Article 3(7) reads, and I quote: "The Parties commit to deepen people linkages by strengthening border management systems and enhancing mobility settings."

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- The basis of approach to this was, the principle of identity management - one person, one identity.

Fiji recognised that for us to be able to get to the level where we can deal confidently with the border systems, we need to scale up our border management system itself. That is the work that is ongoing at this stage. The API/PNR system is working. Now, we are working on technological solutions for border management.

After that, there is planned work now to improve the baseline document which is the document from the birth certificate, registration and death. This is the principal document that informs the issuance of passport and travel documents. If that document is weak, then the identity of the passport is questionable.

The work now is that Australia is assisting Fiji with marriage system, working with the border management system right now. There is ongoing work planned ahead now dealing with the transit area. That is a blank area - in dealing with transitional crime with trafficking and smuggling of migrants, the transition area is a blank spot. Different countries in the world now use iris scans instead of boarding passes. When they go through the gate, the iris scan gives you a better identity check for the person traveling as compared to the boarding pass. There have been proven cases the world over of boarding pass swaps in the transit areas. So, the person who boards the next flight is not the same person who came out on this flight aiming to go. This is an area that we are focusing on now, and this particular section is looking at improving those areas. The deeper people links is improving identity management.

I used the term 'integration' earlier on. The meaning of that is that the system can communicate – the Australian system and our system can communicate. It talks about sharing of information - the authority to share, the validity of the information and the use of information by third parties on either side. That goes into the heart of that particular section, to ensure that the confidentiality of the information we share across the border is intact and the integrity of the system is maintained.

We are grateful to Australia now for the extension of visa. The four months visa on arrival that Fiji issued for Australians, now Australia is reciprocating. Usually, it is three months, now it is four months as well. Now, they are extending to five years on multiple visa - it used to be three years. So, slowly, we are improving with the integrity of the system so that their system has confidence in our system that the person holding the travel document at the gate is the person he claims to be.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- *Bula vinaka*, PS. My questions are on Article 8(2) and Article 10(6). This is in regard to permanent exclusion of judicial arbitration. Article 8(2) strictly prohibits referring any dispute to any national or international court, tribunal, or third party. What are the constitutional risks of agreeing to a dispute settlement mechanism that relies entirely on political consensus and strips Fiji of its right to seek neutral legal recourse under international law?

Article 10(6) is the indefinite binding of the arbitration ban. The Article says that the prohibition against external dispute arbitration under the previous Article 8(2) that I have read, remains permanently binding, even after the treaty is terminated. Why should Fiji agree to an international obligation that binds the State in perpetuity regardless of whether the border treaty is resolved?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- One of the fundamental steps in the negotiation was frank and blunt discussion. We put, on the table, hard issues, it was also based on trust, that the honesty with which we put the issues on the table and discussed was the principle under which we approached this. The Treaty and the Union also recognises one thing, that every decision is taken is subject to the domestic processes of either party. It does not overrule the internal processes.

If there is an issue that Fiji wants to bring across to Australia or vice versa, that is subject to our internal process. We have to decide - if it has to go to Cabinet, it goes to Cabinet, or if it has to go to Parliament, it goes to Parliament. The other party will wait until our internal process is exhausted and we are comfortable with that, then that is the decision we take across. So, it does not take over sovereignty, but in respect of it. I referred earlier to the

integration of the system, but that is at the operation level, to be able to have communication in good faith. However, the sovereign decision under domestic processes is protected and safeguarded, and that is a key safeguard assurance in both the Union and the Alliance.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- I have a question, Dr. Korovavala, on data sovereignty and digital dependency. The Treaty highlights cooperation in securing cyberspace, AI and digital infrastructure. With Australia possessing significantly more advanced cyber surveillance and technical capabilities, how will Fiji protect its domestic data sovereignty and ensure its national networks do not become entirely dependent on or monitored by Australian security apparatus?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- At this point, Fiji needs substantial scaling up of the IT infrastructure, up to a point where we are in a position, and that is part of what is agreed to in the Union - we need capacity building. Through the experience of our Australian counterparts, they are able to share with us the lessons they learned in the process of building.

One of the key things that we learn now is, for example, in the Development Sub Committee (DSC) meeting last week, we are looking into AI and how AI should be managed within the Government services. We are looking at a new policy and framework. We are looking at things like which particular job the AI will take over, and how do we reserve employment that should remain for humans. These are all part of the package and how we need to know what should remain here and what we can share. Where is our weakness in the infrastructure and what we ask our counterparts to assist us to scale up and get there.

For the time being, we need that support. We need technical assistance to get there. However, this is done according to the processes in Government where we go for tender and we go for the terms of reference, to ensure that we are clear not with what we want to do, but what we want achieved. So, our processes in Government, in the procurement processes, this is the conversation we have at technical level, to be able to engage the right expertise, the right technology, to be able to give us the technological solutions that we are looking for. However, at the moment, we need support.

HON. V. LAL.- A follow-up from your question, Madam Chairperson, in regard to the capacity disparities. Now, given the resource mismatch between Fiji's Civil Service and Australia's extensive federal bureaucracy, how will Fiji ensure it has the administrative capacity to prevent its domestic development agendas from being dominated by Australia's policy drafting?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- One of the things that was central in our minds in our discussions, as well as within the Government services today, is we must be clear on what we want. That is the key question. For every paper that comes through DSC, we ask ourselves, why is this paper necessary? What do you want to achieve from it? What is it for Fiji in this paper? Those are the key questions. Whether it is in agriculture, whether it is in border control, whether it is in health, whether in aviation, those are the key questions, and those are the questions we take to our development partners. It is not that we accept, we have to decide that there are certain decisions we cannot afford to accept. However, we have to do our homework and decide that this is what Fiji needs and we work through the NDP, the vision documents, we work on the strategic plan and how this is decoded into the strategic plan of each of the Ministries to make sure that these are aligned.

At the DSC level, this is where the clearing house for policy papers that go up to Cabinet - that we see that these are aligned and are complementary. It does not jeopardize Fiji's interest. However, the key part of this work is us knowing what Fiji needs. What does Fiji want to achieve out of this reach?

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, PS, a direct question to you would be, when you look at Fiji's past, you see so many treaties, so many collaborations, especially in the region. My issue is, yes, this is a great step towards building the Ocean of Peace Centre but is this where we really need the help because our officers monitoring our EEZ or the 12 nautical miles, our Police Officers, we have seen in the media that a few have passed away.

My point is, even looking at securing our borders, I feel like the actual funds, the actual support must go into the system to the officers rather than establishing new treaties, establishing new agreements. We have multiple, so how is this any different or what is going to change for the Pacific nations, especially Fiji? I mean, look at the influx of drugs in the DNA of our children. That, I believe, nothing in the past really has been effective. This looks good on paper, but how can this Treaties be any different now going into the future for Fiji and Fijians?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- Madam Chairperson, this is the first Fiji Treaty - there has never been any other Treaty, so this is the first time we are entering into a treaty. Secondly, transnational crime and security challenges nowadays, it is openly admitted by countries that no one country alone can solve. We talk about transnational organised crimes. The only chance that Fiji, as well as Pacific countries, has is in staying together, in sharing resources, and this is where a treaty of this sort becomes important, that we make a commitment to one another, that we act on trust, knowing that the decision I take or one country takes impacts the other.

There is work ahead of this. You mentioned the maritime. The work in the maritime is to do with legislative and regulatory processes. The work ahead is to decode the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) into domestic legislation so that the multiplicity of agencies that should operate in the maritime space will not run into each other. We are talking about Customs, Immigration, Fisheries, and we are talking about regional partners.

We have the Maritime Emergency Services Centre (MESC) in Lami. In this process, we will become the coordination centre for the region. The same transnational organised syndicates that operate in Fiji also operate in Samoa and Tonga. They look for weaknesses. They understood our legislation very well. They know where the flaws are, and they capitalise on this. However, for us, we do not have the capacity to be able to learn from our mistakes. We need the assistance of other countries, and this is where this Treaty comes into play. I reiterate, this is Fiji's first ever treaty. We have not had any other than this. The one with this is that we make a commitment to work together, and to share information.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- A follow-up to that, yes, fine, but the fact is that there is a lack of financial ability or capacity to fund our forces with an entire border control. I guess it comes down to any government at the end of the day, whoever is in power, to ensure that our Navy is not underfunded, which is a major concern for me because our borders are so porous. How do you ensure that this Treaty will ensure that when annual budgets are made, priority is given to our stakeholders looking after our border control's safety and security?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- Honourable Member and Madam Chairperson, you will probably notice from this particular framework that we have agreed on a 10-year Workplan. That is the first decade Workplan, and there is a commitment to it. From each of the Ministries that has made submissions, they have plans now to scale up their capability. For example, you look at the Police, they will receive $24 million over and above their annual allocation from this particular union. So, they are planning now how to build their capacity, how to build the capability that enables them to be able to do the things they need to do.

However, at the same time, there is cooperation between us. There is public knowledge that the drugs that come our way is probably heading towards Australia and New Zealand. So, it is in their interest also to be able to assist Fiji and the smaller countries to be able to manage this, even before they arrive at their shores.

One of the important components of the Vuvale Union is the economic pillar, and this is the first time, according to Australia, they have accepted this pillar into a treaty of this sort. The whole reason was, Fiji under partnership, needs to be able to pay its way. The credibility of Fiji as a partner is at stake, so we adopted the partnership approach in this particular framework. We built in the economic structure to be able to develop the structure whether it is health, education, port facilities or aviation, so that the structures are able to churn out

the level of capability skills that is able to churn the industry and the economy to the level that we require. So, while we are looking at security on their side, we are also looking at comprehensive security, knowing that the economic side of things must also add up, and this particular treaty has added that.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Through you, Madam Chairperson, my question is around building the integrity of our institutions, that are part of border control. For example, funding is one aspect, however, let us just say they look back at us and say, "Look, this particular organisation needs these certain policies or regulations in place, for instance, the whistleblower policy. Officers need to have absolute integrity, a clear channel of reporting mechanisms against your seniors, et cetera. So, are we going to see the integrity of these institutions further strengthened with this treaty kicking in with the 10-year plan – not just the Fiji Police Force, but the Fiji Navy, the RFMF, Customs, for example, from Fiji Revenue and Customs Services (FRCS) to Immigration, someone who owes $20 million to their country has fled the country. Things like that.

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- Madam Chairperson, any system is as strong as the operators. I totally agree. The governance and transparency elements to the system and institutions are fundamental to the credibility of the whole framework. That particular work continues, and if you look at the new amendments to the Police Act and the Immigration Act, they are trying now to include those in the new legislation to be able to scale up transparency and accountability within these processes.

I totally agree that integrity of the officers operating the system is fundamental to our credibility as a nation, as a system. That work needs to continue and will continue. Part of the work that is done here in the financing under the Vuvale Union is directed towards those. The capacity includes policy, the professional standards of officers, the tracking and the monitoring - all those things come into play because those systems are able to relate to the integrity of decisions that are taken at the end of the process that gives us credible outcomes.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- I have one more question, Madam Chairperson, through you, the lack of balance in the suspension of obligation in Article 8(3), allows either party to unilaterally suspend compliance with treaty obligations during any unresolved dispute. Given Fiji's deep economic and development ties with Australia, does this law grant Australia disproportionate economic leverage over Fiji, if there is a bilateral disagreement?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- That particular provision works equally for both. Again, I go back to the initial approach and the platform of negotiation which is the value. Fiji can suspend any of those if it feels that its values have been degraded or devalued.

On the suspension, one of the areas that we looked at was the ability of the things that can happen that caused one of the parties not to be able to deliver on the provisions of the framework of the Union. In other provisions, we talk about the opening up of consultation. That channel is always open. There is always discussion on the side, and again, we use the approach of the Pacific Way. We use that in the architecture for the Vuvale Talanoa and the Vuvale Bukmak, where we open up the discussions so that all the issues - the interpretation and understanding of both sides is clear and unambiguous. This is key to each of the components of the Union as well as the Alliance - seeking and understanding with trust, with the ability to listen and to understand. That was one of the key areas we focussed on.

We understand that in our Pacific way, in Oceania, most of the time, we misrepresent each other or we misinterpret each other, and that was a key component in looking at this. We were very honest in understanding that these are areas where things can arise, but then we emphasise what we should look for and how we should negotiate this. How should we reconcile ourselves with this? Understanding was a key one to this - that we wait, we listen, listen to understand. The other can suspend and wait until the other party comes around and then open up a discussion. However, one thing we agreed on is that whatever happens, that line of communication consultation is always open.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Just a supplementary to that, Madam Chairperson, I thank the Permanent Secretary for that clarity. Does that restrict Fiji from having bilateral with other States?

DR L. KOROVAVALA.- Absolutely not, Madam Chairperson! That is open. It does not restrict the sovereignty of either country to be able to have that. One thing that I want to underscore here is the Alliance only applies in the Pacific - it does not go beyond the Pacific. So, if Australia has an agreement with Ukraine, for example, Fiji is not obliged to support that, or if Fiji has an agreement with Vietnam, Australia is not obliged to support us on that. This is only for the Pacific. We work on the principle of Fiji's foreign policy, Pacific family regionalism first, and that is where we stand.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you, Dr. Korovavala. I have a question about the sovereign control of our critical infrastructure partnerships. Article 4(2)(b) states, and I quote:

"In accordance with the Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration, the Parties shall:

(b) engage third parties in their critical infrastructure and technology, and security sectors in a manner that honours the Pacific Way and protects and strengthens the Parties' and the Pacific region's individual and collective security."

My question is, given that critical infrastructure is defined to includes ports, telecom, aviation, energy and AI; does that give Australia an effective veto over Fiji's commercial technology contracts and development partnerships with non-Western nations?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- Madam Chairperson, the answer is absolutely not! You would recall that at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we established the Foreign Investment Assessment Unit. One of the roles of that Unit was to see foreign investors that apply to Fiji. There are areas where we made a deliberate decision, on behalf of Fiji, that only certain investments will be allowed. We talked about infrastructure, we talked about aviation, we talked about communication because they encroach into security and sovereignty of the nation.

There was a particular province, I will not name the province, that was approached by a development partner on a partnership in satellite communication. We were informed and we did a background check, and we asked their provincial business arm if they could step away from that particular partner. We asked to shut down that particular investment because he was encroaching into a sovereign security area that jeopardizes the security of Fiji.

There was another country also that wanted to buy freehold land around the international airport. We got information about that. So, we did a background check, and we also asked Investment Fiji to step away, we asked the local partner to step away from that partner, because it is encroaching into a freehold land that is sitting next door to a critical infrastructure of Fiji. That particular provision remains, and it is the understanding of both sides that we will continue to do that, and we have in place a unit under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade that looks at particular part on investment assessment.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Perhaps, my final question on this Treaty - the Treaty allows the Vuvale Forum to invite traditional, religious, community and business leaders to participate. How do we select these non-governmental representatives to ensure that delegations represent a democratic cross-section of Fijian civil society, and what constitutional weight will their input hold?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- Madam Chairperson, for the traditional leaders, we consult with the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs. We approach regional organisations. They organise themselves so that they agree on who represents them and that is based on consensus that we keep it open. We do not dictate who comes or did not come, but it is an open conversation that they agree on who represents them.

The focus that we were targeting was the legitimacy of the voices that come and speak on behalf of people they represent. However, for us, it was critical that we start enabling this particular representation into the decision making of security and sovereignty that affects the land. This is probably the first time that we formally recognise religious leaders and traditional leaders. Now, after all the legal processes have been done, then the next stage will go so that they can organise themselves on who represents who at what particular level of consultation.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Through you, Madam Chairperson, just a question, what is the role of religious leaders in this, if you can just highlight me?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- Madam Chairperson, we recognise that these are voices that is integral to security and peace in Fiji and the region. Some of the people might not have subscribed to a particular traditional setup, but they still have their voice to be heard. They do not have to come if they do not want to come, but we keep it open for them. We know that belief system is strong in this country and we accord that particular privilege so that if they want to share a view, then there is a forum for them to be able to share, but we see that their participation can only strengthen the collective outcome from these processes.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you, Dr. Korovavala. Honourable Members, before we go on to questions relating to the Ocean of Peace Alliance or the Veitacini Treaty, I can see that honourable Ravunawa has another question.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, what would be the financial implication of this Union?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- Madam Chairperson, from the Fiji side, they are subject to annual budgetary provisions, but on the Australian side, they have made a commitment of AUD1.5 billion in the next workplan period of a decade. They have allocated certain portions per sector.

We have been having conversation with respective PSs, that they start working now on their projects and that the project is ready, so when the parliamentary process is

completed, the project is ready, so we can go straight off the ground - whether it is in hospital services or crime prevention or port infrastructure, their respective PSs are now working on it.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you very much, Dr. Korovavala. Honourable Lal, do you want to move on to the Ocean of Peace Alliance, or do you have a question on the Treaty?

HON. V. LAL.- We will move ahead to the Ocean of Peace Alliance.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Dr. Korovavala, we are now going to base our questions on the Ocean of Peace Alliance.

HON. V. LAL.- Madam Chairperson, once this Treaty comes into place right and this is one scenario, in case Australia becomes involved in an armed conflict with a major power in the Pacific, does this obligate Fiji's Military Forces to participate and does this compromise Fiji's historical nonaligned foreign policy?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- Madam Chairperson, the answer is, no. Again, I go back to the domestic processes. If there is an issue, there is an open line of communication, and if a particular challenge affects either country or both the countries, they discuss the best way of resolving that. That is based on the Ocean of Peace Declaration. The principles under which we approach this particular union and alliance come from the principles of the Ocean of Peace and, therein, lies the Pacific way of resolving conflicts and issues in the Pacific region.

We look at this not only for Fiji and Australia, as I mentioned in my earlier remarks, this is also for the region where we are having one eye fixed on the regional processes and the impact - how any decision we take from our side on the whole Pacific region. The whole idea behind this is to stand together, ask and approach this from the Pacific point of view.

If you might recall, some of the utterances by the honourable Prime Minister in earlier sessions when we were dealing with the Ocean of Peace Declaration, we were calling on States or other players outside the region that when they enter the Pacific, they enter into the Pacific way of doing things, which means, we do not go to confrontation, we dialogue, we talk through the issues so that we come to peaceful resolutions, which are also in alignment with the Charter of the UN - the peaceful resolution of conflict.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- My question is about the legal jurisdiction of visiting forces. Article 7 mandates the establishment of visiting forces' agreements and arrangements. What we want to know is, will the visiting foreign military personnel on Fijian soil remain

fully subject to Fiji's domestic criminal and civil courts, or will they be granted sovereign immunity from local prosecution?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- The law of the land applies. Where there are agreements on particular arrangements, for example, when then Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) was deployed to Solomon Islands, the Solomon Islands Parliament had to pass a new law, which was the Foreign Assistance Act, that gives a particular immunity to the Force to be able to conduct the mandate on which they were invited there to do. That is quite consistent throughout the world.

That is the same law that applies for peacekeeping operations. There is immunity afforded to foreign armed forces working with the local but according to your laws. There is no room there for just willful disobedience. It is done within a very structured legal framework under which they conduct their operation or do their work according to the agreement.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Madam Chairperson, just a quick one on what the PS said on the Pacific way of dialogue and resolving conflict. However, the Pacific Ocean has been exploited by greater powers for decades. Some greater powers do not understand the language of dialogue - they know their missiles, their military taking over. If Fiji is ever in a position to be attacked, what defence mechanisms are in place? In the way the world is moving and how global alliances are shaping trade, which we clearly see, what are the plans for Fiji or who comes to Fiji's aid when dialogue and debate is not at the table?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- One of the first tools in armament is diplomacy. One of the key positions in the foreign policy white paper is determined diplomacy, which means that we do not wait, we go up front and state our position. One of the advantages of having that paper published was the world knows Fiji stand when it comes to issues like this. Before, we had to meet and they learned from us what our position is but here, the world knows, we declared our position on certain things and this is a position we take.

Fiji believes in proactive action, and I think over the years, we have proved to the world that we are peace loving and we stand for peace. Our footprint in the peacekeeping operation speaks for itself. The work of our leaders in past years has also communicated that intention - from the late Ratu Mara to the current Prime Minister. They have been active in diplomatic discussions to defuse thorny issues, to talk through what are peaceful ways of resolving differences.

We do not believe that a particular country will go unprovoked to attack someone else but then, this is why we have agreements, whether it is in fishing, whether it is in border control

or maritime domain awareness, this is where we have this communication and Fiji, under the Union, upholds the rule of law, including international law. There are conventions there and that is what Fiji stands for and believes in which the UN Charter advocates these particular legal systems under which we also use and rely upon.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, a quick follow up, you are saying that Fiji stands for peace, world peace, we are promoting the Ocean of Peace, we speak about how vulnerable we are at climate change, but PS, I just want to understand – is this our real foreign policy or real act of hypocrisy because Fiji had abstained on the UN vote with 12 other nations when it came to the rights of Palestinians and all of that. I will not go into depth on that, so on one side, we are talking about our vulnerabilities and our peace but on a global scale, we are abstaining votes on major issues. Where exactly are we as a nation?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- Our position in the international arena is, we are 'friends to all, enemy to none'. This Treaty does not affect that - that stays, but at the same time, Fiji does not want to get involved in issues that are best solved by those that know better of their parties to the conflict. You probably recall that even in closer to home, in New Caledonia, Fiji stood back until it is invited to make some contribution or assistance. In the case of West Papua, similar thing - Fiji does not push forward, it waits until invited, and that is the position Fiji takes.

That is also the position that Fiji expects, in how it is treated when it comes to issues, particularly, complex issues like this, or historical issues. We work from the basis that we need to understand the issue first before we can even contemplate a solution or propose a way around it.

HON. I. TUIWAILEVU.- Madam Chairperson, my question is on Article 6, the mutual defence. Article 6 says, provided that an armed attack on a party within the Pacific would be regarded as a danger to both parties and States, that each would be acted to meet a common danger in accordance with its domestic process. The question is, if an armed attack occurs, what exactly is Fiji legally committed to do under Article 6 and what does, in accordance with this domestic process, means a practice particularly regarding the role of Cabinet and Parliament before Fiji commit its military personnel or resources?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- Madam Chairperson, the end to that particular article says exactly what is going to happen, which means that there is a briefing - understanding that situation, but then the domestic process will take place. Cabinet is fully briefed on what the situation is, who are the parties of the conflict, why the conflict happened in the first place, what is Fiji's participation in going to contribute to achieving peace, remembering that this

particular union and alliance is inspired by the Ocean of Peace Declaration. We are there because we uphold peace.

In the case of Bougainville, the discussion in 1994 came around this way. The Pacific countries demanded some briefing to understand what was the situation in Bougainville before they even considered talking about the status - force agreement, and even before they were deployed.

In the case of Solomon Islands, the Solomon Islands Governor asked three times before the Pacific countries were willing to sit together and talk. Even then, they demanded that certain things be put in place, including the framework under which they were able to deploy. On the ground, as a former Forum representative in Solomon Islands, we went through how the mechanisms should be in place in order for the Force to deliver outcomes that benefit the people, bring peace and bring calm to the situation in the host country. That is exactly what this particular provision requires of us in order to uphold the intention of the alliance.

HON. V. LAL.- Madam Chairperson, I can see that the Article says that individual countries need to maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity. To follow up on his question, if there is an armed attack, does this obligate Fiji to increase its military defence spending and, if so, how will it affect our budget?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- Madam Chairperson, I think we should look back at history. This particular alliance is preceded by a history that has spanned 118 years since World War I. When we look back at those years, how did Fiji come into contact? How did Fiji enter into conflict? We look at the size of the constabulary and the size of the military established at the time. We look at the mission that they were called upon to deploy to. Again, this particular alliance is based on the Ocean of Peace Declaration. We are there to look for peace. We are there to prosecute the work on the ground to achieve peace. We are not there to fight a war for its own sake, but we are there to advocate for and stand for peace.

When we look at Fiji's engagement in World War II; Fiji engagement in Timor-Leste, formerly East Timor; Fiji's engagement in 1994 in Bougainville and the Solomon Islands; and Fiji engagement in the Middle East, Sudan and Northern Africa, we also look at how they went to Malaya; they. were all for peace, looking for peace.

At times, contrary to belief, in cases where we search for peace, weakness is also strength. In peacekeeping operations, massive armament does not prosecute peace. We find that on the ground in Lebanon, weakness, and light arms were also strengths, because we were not there as a threat, but to stand for what peace stands for. This is where the alliance comes

from. Based on the Ocean of Peace Declaration, we are there to make sure that peace is achieved and maintained.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- I have a question, but I will give the floor to honourable Ravunawa, then I will ask my question.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Madam Chairperson, my question is in Article 11(1). It completely bans referring disputes about the treaty to any national or international tribunal, meaning there is no recourse for defensive breaches. If a party fails to fulfil its defence obligation during a national security crisis, what diplomatic remedies or enforcement mechanisms does Fiji poses if external arbitration is prohibited?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- Madam Chairperson, I beg to repeat - the understanding in the agreement is based on good faith and based on the Pacific Way - that we are here as a Pacific family, guided by Pacific regionalism. That is the basis on which we approach this. We are coming together based on a shared history of standing together in years of conflict, peacekeeping operations and humanitarian emergency responses. We have worked together. Our soldiers train in Australia and New Zealand are trained under the Australian Defence Force Manual Warfare. We work from the same sheet, we work from the same philosophy of how we conduct ourselves, and that was the basis of truth where we saw the relationship today.

We came from a position of mature relationship. It is not something that we are doing now that we do not understand each other. We see that in good faith, as we did over the years, and then we do during the negotiation that this was how differences might be negotiated and resolved that safeguard the relationship, going forward. We look at this from a Pacific Continent, from Pacific family, that if there are disagreements within families, but there is also mechanism for resolution within families, and they talk honestly and understand each other's issues and that is how they resolve it.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Dr. Korovavala, I have a question, still on Article 6 on mutual defence. This is the definition of threshold of an armed attack and collective defence in Article 6 is triggered by an armed attack. Because of hybrid warfare where Fiji recognizes action such as catastrophic State sponsored cyber-attacks State or maritime blockades of critical trade routes, or the cutting of undersea telecom cables as armed attack that would trigger this Article 6 of the Treaty?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- Madam Chairperson, one of the key approaches to peace operations is proportionality. We look at this as a reason why we need to work with Australia in particular in this case, to build the capabilities to be able to protect our critical infrastructure.

One of the areas that we look at and this is based from work experience is under the Law of the Sea, for example, if a crime is committed within the territorial waters, and then the vessel escapes through contiguous zone, water authority does our enforcement agency has in applying the necessary measures when that vessel is in the contiguous zone or EEZ. This is where I alluded to earlier that these are work ahead of us, to be able to decode the UNCLOS so that our agencies are able to do what they need to do to protect our sovereignty and territory within those areas. This is an area where other jurisdictions also struggle, and because of the zoning in the maritime areas.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- I would like to ask about veto rights and the expansion of this Alliance. Article 12(3) permits other Pacific States to join the Treaty but only by unanimous consent of the existing parties. What diplomatic criteria would Fiji establish to evaluate prospective members and how will Fiji ensure that the expansion of membership of the Alliance does not import in external geopolitical rivalries into the Pacific?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- Madam Chairperson, Fiji subscribes to the 250 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. Within that particular document, members of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) talk about co-operation, but at the heart of it is integration, which means we share geographical space, we share cultural space, we share economic space and we share security spaces. As a member of the PIF family, we also share information on how best to manage the overlap in this particular area.

There has been discussion about, for example, in the Pacific Resilience Facility (PRF) in response to climate funding but when we come to regional grouping like this and deal with funding, that we need to look at the regional mechanism in order to be able to uphold transparency and accountability of funds like this because the credibility of the region hangs in abeyance of this and because we are sharing the space, we also need to be mindful of the laws in other countries, what can they share or not share, and some of the countries might have secrecy legislation and we do not, so they are not able to share because their law prohibits them from sharing. This is the kind of area that we need to work through. When Pacific Island countries want to join and become a multilateral alliance, these are the things that we will talk through with them.

Of course, because we believe that and together, we are stronger, but also there are issues for us too because these are sovereign decisions and these are issues we will talk through with them. Given that we line up the principles and the pillars of the framework, how much

are they prepared to embrace this? What are they prepared to give away in order to embrace that particular understanding? So, there is a bit of work for us to do in that particular front, but the issue is noted. Thank you.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- On Article 15, which allows any party to withdraw from this Treaty within 12 months giving a12 months' notice. So, in the event of sudden political shift or change of government of either nation, how will Fiji manage the immediate defense and training gaps created during the 12 months transitional period?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- Madam Chairperson, ideally, we would like the Alliance to run indefinitely. However, unforeseen circumstances might happen that there might be a stepping back from this arrangement for whatever reason, and this is the reason why, under the partnership, we would like Fiji to stand on its own credibility.

For Fiji we have to work harder to be able to scale up our capability to be able to do that. At the end of the day, Fiji still has the responsibility to look after its own people, create employment, education, the referral to other Pacific Islands either in education or health. Fiji is the first referral point and we still have to do that with or without a Treaty.

In this particular case, we are thankful in this Treaty that there is a commitment on the part of our partner, Australia, to be able to assist Fiji, knowing that every investment that is put to Fiji under this Alliance and Union is also of benefit to other Pacific Island Countries. Therefore, in that particular sense, the Alliance and the Union has enabled Fiji to be able to deliver on its status and role as a hub. The hub, as attractive as it is, comes with huge responsibility for Fiji, and there is an expectation on Fiji in that particular role. This particular framework enables Fiji to be able to deliver on this.

HON. V. LAL.- Last one from me, Madam Chairperson. How will Fiji ensure that militaryto-military cooperation under this Alliance remains strictly subservient to civilian political leadership and does not, in any way, increase the political influence of the military in Fiji's domestic governance?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- Madam Chairperson, in my penultimate remarks initially, I alluded to the vital ground. In military terms, there are key features but there is only one vital ground. For someone to be able to dominate the battle area, he needs to capture the vital ground. Once that particular vital ground is captured, he dominates and controls the whole operation. In this particular sense, I consider the vital ground as democracy.

With democracy, all these commitments hold - rights, the rule of law, freedom, and the growth of economy holds. Fiji's credibility in the region and internationally holds. If we lose that, if we lose democracy, within democracy is the primacy of civil rule. In democracy is subservience of armed forces to civil authorities. I think from recent indications we are seeing a progression towards that, to develop and to mature democracy.

This particular Treaty and Alliance help in the re-professionalization of our institutions and that we should encourage and help. I am very grateful to the Commander of the RFMF and the Commissioner of the Police Force who are very active in the negotiation, and they support this. These are professional soldiers and police personnel, who want to see a re-professionalisation of their institution which is all in our combined interest. Again, I emphasize that all this happens within a democracy. If we lose democracy, nothing else holds.

HON. I. TUIWAILEVU.- Madam Chairperson, just my last question; the amendment to Article 16 says it allows review only after the Treaty has been into force for 10 years, followed by consultation and mutual agreement for amendment. Why must Fiji wait 10 years before the formal review of the Treaty, given the Pacific security environment can change rapidly and what mechanisms exist to address the urgent problem or unforeseen consequences before the 10 years review?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- Madam Chairperson, the 10 years that has been indicated as a minimum time that we can grow and mature the capabilities that we try to develop here. If we imagine a particular police officer that is recruited on day one in 10 years' time, that particular officer has matured into the professional business of policing. Likewise, we are able to also expand the base of those infrastructures.

Let us imagine for a while the forensic investigation or financial forensic investigation capability whether it is in trafficking or smuggling. It takes a while to be able to build those and gives us the opportunity to learn lessons from our rebuilding work and invest those lessons into the effort that we put into building those that we are able to learn. Anything shorter than that, we are not able to see for ourselves and make informed decisions whether what we have developed will sustain us or what are the things that we can add on to be able to improve the capability that we developed.

Also, it allows future leaders of these institutions to be able to mature into the work and informed in the way that they are able to carry out their responsibilities in the leaders of the future in the next 10 years after that.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Just a last one from me, Madam Chairperson. I am sorry, I have to go back to the Vuvale Union Treaty, on the establishment of the office here in Suva, the funding of that office.

Also, throughout your presentation, Dr. Korovavala, you are very ambitious on how we can grow our democracy within our people and also in our governance. That is a very obvious thought. I understand only in the Pacific, we can make our canoe and sail the canoe at the same time, and I think this is what we are doing now. On one hand, Australia has already committed millions of dollars in Ministry of Health and Ministry of Policing, as well as other entities. So, they are giving money on the one hand, and they want this treaty for Fiji to ascend to on the other hand. My question is the strengthening of this Treaty. Is it not that Australia is trying to buy Fiji's interest into what they are offering us right now before we sign up with this Treaty?

DR. L. KOROVAVALA.- Madam Chairperson, it is a fact of life that everyone has an interest. It is a fact of life that everyone aspires to something. I also believe that Fiji is called to something larger than itself. Fiji is in such a geographical location that it is a hub.

Since the former and late Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew made the announcement in 1972 and made the address to the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara that Fiji is a regional hub, since that day, that word 'hub' sticks, and we see ourselves as a hub in the Pacific. We aspire to that. We have an interest to be that, and we have an interest that our voices need to be heard. We have something important to say to the region. Every country has an interest. However, the challenges we face are more than ours individually. We come together because that is the best way to be able to resolve this.

Size in today's world does not really matter. It is important, but it is not everything. In the same token, development partners are important, but they are not the same. The key is us. What is our interest? Where do we want to be? If we embrace the idea of a hub, then we need to understand the responsibilities of that particular status, and that is the challenge for us. Whether it is in health, in education or agriculture, they look to us. There is a reasonable expectation that Fiji must deliver.

At the DSC level, in late May, we adopted the position for every policy that goes up to Cabinet, must include two more compulsory evaluation. The first two are legal and financial. The reason too is the *iTaukei* impacts and regional impacts. We need to look inside ourselves and see what is the impact of this is on us. Then you look outwards to the region because of who we are, where we are and what is the impact of the decision I make for myself on the region or other Pacific Islands who look to me for help. Those are the

questions that Fiji is taking. By taking those questions, Fiji has become a leader, because we are now starting to question ourselves and the decisions we make, and how it affects everyone else.

In late 2023, still at foreign affairs and during the political dialogue with the European Union, Fiji has now taken the lead in trying to define a legal framework for people displaced by rising sea level. The world has not talked about that. Fiji has taken the lead, because Fiji has been approached indirectly that certain communities in the Pacific want to relocate. If the level of sea rises to a point, they need to relocate. They are looking at Fiji to relocate here, so Fiji has gone that way to prepare.

However, that is the responsibility of a hub. That is the responsibility of someone, of a country that looks and believes in something larger than itself and that is where we are today. That is the reality of Fiji. This particular union and alliance give Fiji the ability to be able to think as a hub and act as a hub.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you very much, Dr. Korovavala, for staying this long. Thank you for answering all the questions from the Committee about the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union Treaty and the Ocean of Peace Alliance. We thank you very much for making yourself available to meet with the Committee. We appreciate your time and cooperation, and we look forward to your continued engagement should we require any more information from the Office of the Prime Minister. I declare this meeting closed.

The Committee adjourned at 3.43 p.m.

Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs, RFMF and Republic of Fiji Navy

Statement by Hon Pio Tikoduadua

Minister for Defence and Veterans Affairs
Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs & Defence
Thursday 3 September 2026 | 2:30pm

Deputy Chair

Distinguished members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence Ni sa buta vinaka

I am please to be here this afternoon with my team from the Ministry for Defence and Veterans Affairs and RFMF to deliver this written public submission on the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance (also known as the Veitacini Treaty)

Let me start by introducing the team.

On my right, is the Permanent Secretary of Defence and Veterans Affairs, Mr. Mason Smith. On his right is Col Aseri Rokoura, Director Force Development and Strategic Engagement.

On my left is the DC/COS of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces Brigadier General Sape Motufaga and Commander RFN Commodore Timoci Natuva and last but not the least my support staff.

Deputy Chair,

Of the two treaties mentioned above, the Veitacini Treaty is the one that falls within the Ministry's mandate and responsibilities, hence we will focus on that Treaty in our submission. The elevated Defence dialogue is built on the foundation of resource commitments, operational integration, dialogue and information sharing.

The Ministry has been fully involved in the Treaty discussions since the proposal was first announced by the Hon PM in June 2025 at the National Press Club in Canberra Australia.

The Permanent Secretary for Defence and Veterans Affairs and the Deputy Commander of the RFMF have represented the Ministry at these Treaty discussions.

Chair

Allow me to now highlight several critical areas that Fiji will work together with Australia to build the foundations of an elevated Defence relationship. These are:

- Fiji's Sovereign Aviation Capability,
- Maritime Security and Surveillance,
- Infrastructure Development,
- Veterans Affairs,
- HADR and Peacekeeping Support,
- Capability Development: Cyber Defence, and • Capacity Building.

Fiji's Sovereign Aviation Capability

Australia currently provides Fiji with a 027 aircraft for two weeks every six weeks. The aircraft is used for national tasking including the movement of approximately 40 tons of equipment to our remote areas per rotation. Ministries that have since benefitted from the C27 include, the CRC, The Ministry for Rural & Maritime Affairs, the Ministry for Youth & Sports, and the Rotuma Island Council to name a few. In addition, the C27 is also tasked with EEZ surveillance to improve our maritime domain awareness, fight [UU Fishing and most importantly contribute to the war against drugs and TNOC. In addition, the aircraft is also tasked for SAR missions.

Looking ahead, the Veitacini Treaty will support Fiji's strategic priority of developing a sustainable sovereign aviation capability. The Ministry has since established a Technical Aviation Advisory Board (TAAB) made up of aviation stakeholders, including the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) to oversee this strategic priority. The TAAB has since secured Cabinet approval for Fiji's air capability needss and the Ministry is working closely with the RAAF to provide the GOF with options that align with our air capability needs of responding to disasters including SAR, monitoring our maritime domain, delivering goods and services to our remote and outer island communities, and supporting law enforcement agencies and national resilience.

Maritime Security and Surveillance

Under the Vuvale Agreement, Australia built the Maritime Essential Services Centre (M ESC) in Lami and donated three Guardian class patrol boats worth millions of dollars. As part of the Veitacini Treaty the Ministry signed a maintenance agreement with the Australian DOD for Australia to maintain the MESC and service the patrol boats saving Fiji thousands of dollars - funds that can be utilized elsewhere.

The Veitacini Treaty specifically recognizes that Fiji and Australia share common security threats across the Blue Pacific and therefore enhancing maritime cooperation is of critical strategic importance if we are to find shared solutions to common challenges. In this regard, the Veitacini Treaty will over the next 10 years, strengthen the operational capacity of the RFMF RFN, and the MESC to monitor and protect Fiji's maritime domain. This will be achieved through the purchase of uncrewed sea vessels, UAVs (drones) air surveillance and information sharing. The midterm goal is to make the MESC a regional facility. In addition, the Ministry will, over the next 10 years, establish operating bases in the North, Rotuma, Lau and in the Westto extend the reach of our maritime assets where they are most needed.

Furthermore, the Ministry is working hand-in-glove under the Veitacini Treaty (and other donors) to finalize a Maritime Security Strategy that will guide the way Fiji deals with threats to its maritime borders. This will be supported by a Maritime Powers Act and a Search & Rescue (SAR) Bill.

Infrastructure Development

Under the Veitacini Treaty the RFMF has recently taken ownership of a fully equipped gym that will contribute to the health and wellbeing of service personnel at QEB.

The construction of the 3FlR complex in QEB (with assistance also from Japan) is progressing well and it is estimated that 30% of the drawings will be ready by Dec 26.

The Veitacini Treaty has also funded the $2.7M QEB Armoury which is 72% complete and should be fully completed by Feb 27. In addition, the $2.2M renovation of the CRFMF's Office is 38% complete and should be fully completed by Nov 26.

Veterans Affairs

At Fiji's request, the Veitacini Treaty will consider health care access of which the GOF may utilize in support of its veterans.

Dedicated funding to support veterans' welfare programs and services is also being explored.

The increasing interoperability between the RFMF and the ADF necessitates the establishment of a formal cooperative framework addressingveterans from both nations. Such a framework will support the establishment of dedicated Veterans Affairs Division within the Ministry for Defence & Veterans Affairs that will provide ongoing assistance to former service personnel.

These are work in progress and will be part of our 10-year work plan under the Veitacini Treaty.

HADR and Peacekeeping Support

Under the Veitacini Treaty, The RFMF deploys an infantry company to train in Australia for six months every year. The rotational company provides the RFMF with an opportunity to improve interoperability with the ADF, refine its warfighting and HADR skills. These deployments are further supported by the signed SOFA between Fiji and Australia.

In addition, the Pacific Response Group (PRC) which was mandated by the South Pacific Defence Ministers Meeting (SPDMM) will further enhance Fiji's contribution to national and regional HADR efforts.

The accreditation of UN courses delivered at the Australian funded and built BlackRock camp in Nadi will be further explored as part of the 10-year Veitacini Treaty work plan

The Veitacini Treaty provides strategic lift for the RFMF peacekeeping rotations to and the Middle East and as part of its Force protection measures Fiji has benefitted from the purchase of Australian Bushmasters for use in UNDOF.

The drafting of Fiji's Peace Operations Strategy will benefit from the Veitacini Treaty by way of legal drafting support from the ADF. Fiji has also requested drafting support for the drafting of the MOD Act and the Military Justice Bill.

Capability and Capacity Development: Cyber Defence

Cyber threats to defence and national security environments are multifaceted and increasingly sophisticated, making them a critical concern for national security. This underscores the importance of strong information security practices, effective information sharing mechanisms, and the protection of critical infrastructure. A coordinated approach and resilient approach are required to safeguard sensitive systems, ensure continuity of operations, and enable timely detection and response to emerging threats across the cyber domain for the Ministry and the RFMF. In this regard, the Veitacini Treaty will provide technical and capacity building support over the next 1 0 years.

Capacity Building

Under the Veitacini Treaty the Ministry and the RFMF will benefit from enhanced training, support and professional development for policy officers focusing on areas such as maritime governance, border security, critical infrastructure and related national security priorities.

RFMF Officers and selected Defence civilians will also benefit from attendance at relevant courses including Staff College and War College. Embedding of ADF and DOD staff to the RFMF and the Ministry will be enhanced. A Defence civilian will soon embed with the Pacific Division of the DOD in Canberra Australia.

'Chair,

No doubt there will be legislative, policy, regulatory, institutional and administrative requirements that will be necessary to operationalize this Veitacini Treaty. This is work in progress as we further refine our 10-year work plan. The Ministry has restructured to meet some of the priority positions necessary to support the Veitacini Treaty and the budget for these positions is being sourced from with the Ministry's regular budget.

As with any new mission, there are inherent risks associated with the Veitacini Treaty— for example political priorities may change post elections. At the operational level a risk matrix is being discussed with the team and an MEL unit will be established to monitor the progress of the treaty implementation.

The Ministry is fully committed to ensure the full implementation of the provisions of the Treaty and we thank you for your ongoing support in this area.

Thank you, madam chair and Committee members, my team and I will be happy to take questions. Vinaka vakalevu.

[VERBATIM REPORT]

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

UNION/TREATY

(1) FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION
(2) OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE (VEITACINI TREATY)

ENTITY: (1) Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs, RFMF and Republic of Fiji Navy

VENUE: Big Committee Room (East Wing)
DATE: Thursday, 3rd September, 2026

VERBATIM REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE HELD AT THE COMMITTEE ROOM (EAST WING), PARLIAMENT PRECINCTS, GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, ON THURSDAY,

3RD SEPTEMBER, 2026, AT 9.09 A.M.

Present

Hon. R.R. Sharma	-	Deputy Chairperson
Hon. P.K. Ravunawa	-	Member
Hon. I. Tuiwailevu	-	Member
Hon. V. Lal	-	Member

Apologies

Hon. L.S. Qereqeretabua	-	Chairperson
Hon T.R. Matasawalu	-	Member

Interviewee/ Submittee: Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs

In Attendance:

Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs

(1) Hon. Pio Tikoduadua - Minister for Defence and Veteran Affairs
(2) Mr. Mason Smith - Permanent Secretary

Republic of Fiji Military Forces

(1) Brigadier Sapenafa Motufaga - Deputy Commander RFMF and Chief of Staff
(2) Colonel Aseri Rokoura - Director, Host Development and Strategic Engagement

Republic of Fiji Navy

(1) Commodore Timoci Natuva - Commander, Republic of Fiji Navy

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DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Good morning to you all, honourable Members of the Committee and the submittees before us - the honourable Minister and Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs, as well as representatives from the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) representatives. To the members of the media, the public and dear

viewers, ladies and gentlemen, a very good morning as well to you all. It is my pleasure to welcome everyone present in this room and those joining us via live broadcast.

At the outset, for information purposes, I wish to advise that pursuant to the Standing Orders of Parliament, specifically Standing Order 111, all Committee meetings are open to the public and media. Accordingly, this meeting is open to the public and members of the media.

However, should there be any sensitive information relating to this meeting that cannot be disclosed publicly, such information may be provided to the Committee either in writing or in a closed session. This will only be permitted in limited circumstances, including matters relating to national security, third party confidential information, personnel or human resource matters and Committee deliberation and development of the Committee's recommendations and report.

I wish to remind honourable Members and witnesses that all comments and questions should be directed through the Chair. For viewers following this meeting live on *Facebook*, questions may be submitted via the comments section. Please, note that only relevant questions will be considered by the Committee. Members of the Committee may interject during the submission, or alternatively, questions will be raised at the conclusion of your presentation.

Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs Officials
, 2026

I further remind all present that this is a parliamentary proceeding. All information provided is protected under the Parliamentary Powers and Privileges Act and the Standing Orders of Parliament. Slander or libel of any kind will not be condoned, and all information presented to the Committee should be factual.

In terms of meeting protocols, movement within the meeting room should be kept to a minimum. The usage of mobile phones is discouraged, and all mobile phones to be placed on silent mode for the duration of the meeting.

I will now introduce the honourable Members of the Standing Committee of Foreign Affairs and Defence.

(Introduction of Committee Members and Secretariat)

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Today, the Committee will receive an in-person joint

submission from the Ministry of Defence and Veterans Affairs and the RFMF in relation to the FijiAustralia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance or Veitacini Treaty, which are currently before the Committee.

I now invite the representatives of the Ministry and RFMF to introduce themselves and proceed with their submission. You have 15 minutes for your opening statement and then we will have questions from the Committee Members. Kindly note that the microphone should be turned on before you speak and turned off immediately after speaking, to avoid any disruption to the live submission.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Deputy Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence and distinguished members of the Standing Committee, *ni sa bula vinaka*. I am pleased to be here to present the matter before the Committee, on behalf of Government and the Ministry of Defence and the Republic of Fiji Military Forces. Just by way of introduction, let me introduce the team that is here with me today.

(Introduction of Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs and RFMF Officials)

Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members of the Committee, of the Union and Treaty that are before the Committee, the Veitacini Treaty is the one that falls within the Ministry's mandate and responsibilities. Hence, we will focus on that Treaty in our submission this morning.

The elevated Defence Dialogue is built on the foundation of resource commitments, operational integration, dialogue and information sharing. The Ministry has been fully involved in the Treaty discussions since the proposal was first announced by the honourable Prime Minister in June 2025 at the National Press Club in Canberra, Australia. The Permanent Secretary for Defence and Veteran Affairs and the Deputy Commander of RFN at the time, Commodore Tawake, had represented the Ministry at these Treaty discussions.

Deputy Chairperson, allow me now to highlight several critical areas that Fiji will work together with Australia to build the foundations of an elevated defence relationship, and these are:

(1) Fiji's sovereign aviation capability;
(2) Maritime security and surveillance;
(3) Infrastructure development;
(4) Veteran Affairs;
(5) Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) and peacekeeping support;

(6) Capability development; (7) Cyber defence; and
(8) Capacity building.

In the area of Fiji's sovereign aviation capability, Australia currently provides Fiji with a C27J aircraft for two weeks every six weeks. The aircraft is used for national tasking, including the movement of approximately 40 tonnes of equipment to our remote areas per rotation.

Ministries that have since benefited from the C-27J include the CRC, the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management, Ministry of Youth and Sports, and the Rotuma Island Council, to name but a few. In addition, the C-27J is also tasked with the EEZ surveillance to improve our maritime domain awareness, fight IUU fishing, and most importantly, contribute to the war against drugs and Transnational Organised Crime (TNOC). In addition, the aircraft is also tasked for Search and Rescue (SAR) missions.

Looking ahead, the Veitacini Treaty will support Fiji's strategic priority of developing a sustainable sovereign aviation capability. The Ministry has since established a Technical Aviation Advisory Board (TAAB), made up of aviation stakeholders, including the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), to oversee this strategic priority.

The TAAB has since secured Cabinet approval for Fiji's air capability needs, and the Ministry is working closely with the RAAF to provide the Government of Fiji with options that align with our air capability needs of responding to disasters, including search and rescue, monitoring our maritime domain, delivering goods and services to our remote and other island communities, and supporting law enforcement agencies and national resilience.

In the area of maritime security and surveillance, under the Vuvale Agreement, Australia built the Maritime Essential Services Centre (MESC) in Lami and donated three Guardian-class patrol boats worth millions of dollars. As part of the Veitacini Treaty, the Ministry signed a maintenance agreement with the Australian Department of Defence for Australia to maintain the MESC and service the patrol boats, saving Fiji thousands of dollars, fund that can be utilised elsewhere.

The Veitacini Treaty specifically recognises that Fiji and Australia share common security threats across the Blue Pacific and, therefore, enhancing maritime cooperation is of critical strategic importance if we are to find shared solutions to common challenges. In this regard, the Veitacini Treaty, over the next 10 years, will strengthen the operational capacity of the RFMF, the RFN, and the MESC, to monitor and protect Fiji's maritime domain. This will be achieved through the purchase of uncrewed sea vessels, UAVs, meaning drones, air surveillance and information sharing. The midterm goal is to make the MESC a regional facility.

In addition, the Ministry will, over the next 10 years, establish operating bases in the North, Rotuma, Lau and in the West, to extend the reach of our maritime messages where they are most needed. Furthermore, the Ministry is working hand in glove under the Veitacini Treaty and other donors to finalise a Maritime Security Strategy that will guide the way Fiji deals with threats to its maritime borders. This will be supported by a Maritime Powers Act and a Search and Rescue Bill.

On infrastructure development under the Veitacini Treaty, the RFMF has recently taken ownership of a fully equipped gym that will contribute to the health and wellbeing of service personnel at the Queen Elizabeth Barracks. The construction of the 3FIR complex in QEB with the assistance from the Government of Japan, is progressing well and is estimated that 30 percent of the drawings will be ready by December 2026.

The Veitacini Treaty has also funded the $2.7 million Queen Elizabeth Barracks Armoury, which is 72 percent complete and should be fully completed by 27th February. In addition, the $2.2 million dollars renovation of the Commander RFMF's Office is 38 percent complete and should be fully completed by November 2026.

In the areas of veterans' affairs, at Fiji's request, the Veitacini Treaty will consider healthcare access to which the Government of Fiji may utilise in support of its veterans. Dedicated funding to support veterans' welfare programmes and services is also being explored. Increasing interoperability between the RFMF and ADF necessitates the establishment of a formal cooperative framework, addressing veterans from both nations.

Such a framework will support the establishment of a dedicated Veterans Affairs Division within the Ministry of Defence and Veterans Affairs that will provide ongoing assistance to former service personnel. These are works in progress and will be part of our 10-year plan under the Veitacini Treaty.

On humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and peacekeeping support, under the Veitacini Treaty, the RFMF deploys an infantry company to train in Australia for six months every year. The rotational company provides the RFMF with an opportunity to improve interoperability with the ADF, refines its warfighting and HADR skills. These deployments are further supported by the signed Status of Forces Agreement between Fiji and Australia.

In addition, the Pacific Response Group (PRG), which was mandated by the South Pacific Defence Minister's Meetings (SPDMM), will further enhance Fiji's contribution to national and regional HADR efforts. The accreditation of UN courses delivered at the Australian-funded built Black Rock Camp in Nadi will be further explored as part of the 10-year Veitacini Treaty workplan.

The Veitacini Treaty provides a strategic lift for the RFMF peacekeeping rotations to and from the Middle East, and as part of its Force protection measures, Fiji has benefited from the purchase of the Australian Bushmasters for use in its UNDOF Mission in the Golan Heights in Syria.

The drafting of Fiji's Peace Operations Strategy will benefit from the Veitacini Treaty by way of legal drafting support from the ADF. Fiji has also requested drafting support for the drafting of the Ministry of Defence Act and Military Justice Bill, presently in conjunction with the Office of the Solicitor-General.

On capability and capacity development, particularly on cyber defence, cyber threats to defence and national security environments are multifaceted and increasingly sophisticated, making them a critical concern for national security. This underscores the importance of strong information security practices, effective information sharing mechanisms and the protection of critical infrastructure.

A coordinated approach and resilient approach are required to safeguard sensitive systems and show continuity of operations and enable timely detection and response to emerging threats across the cyber domain for the Ministry and the RFMF. In this regard, the Veitacini Treaty will provide technical and capacity building support over the next 10 years.

In capacity building, under the Veitacini Treaty, the Ministry and the RFMF will benefit from enhanced training, support and professional development for policy officers, focussing on areas such as maritime governance, border security, critical infrastructure, and related national security priorities.

The RFMF Officers and the selected defence civilians will also benefit from the attendance at relevant courses, including Staff College and War College, embedding of ADF and the Department of Defence (DoD) staff to the RFMF and the Ministry will be enhanced. A Defence civilian will be soon embedded within the Pacific Division of the Department of Defence in Canberra, Australia.

Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members of the Committee, no doubt, that there will be legislative, policy, regulatory, institutional, and administrative requirements that will be necessary to operationalise this Veitacini Treaty. This is work in progress as we further refine our 10-year workplan. The Ministry has restructured to meet some of the priority positions necessary to support the Veitacini Treaty, and the budget for these positions is being sourced from within the Ministry's regular budget.

As with any new mission, there are inherent risks associated with the Veitacini Treaty. For example, political priorities may change post-elections. At the operational level, a risk matrix is

being discussed with the team, and a Monitoring and Evaluation Unit (MEU) will be established to monitor the progress of the Treaty implementation.

The Ministry is fully committed to ensure the full implementation of the provision of the Treaty, and we thank you for your ongoing support in this area.

Deputy Chairperson and Members of the Committee, that concludes our short-written statement, and we are happy to take questions from the Committee should you need further clarifications.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you, Sir. I open the floor for the honourable Members to ask questions.

HON. I. TUIWAILEVU.- Through you, Deputy Chairperson, the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union, in Article 4(3), declares that a third-party military or other security base ongoing presence, arrangements or visits could threaten or undermine the Parties or Pacific region's individual or collective security. How will the Ministry of Defence authorise this clause to ensure it does not restrict Fiji's independent rights to host a routine port visit, joint training and policy cooperation with other non-signatory international partners?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- I think our presentation today is primarily on the Veitacini Treaty. I will attempt to answer that from a defence and national security perspective. The short answer to the question is that it should not. Fiji partners with the major powers of the world within the region, which includes the US, China, Australia, New Zealand and France. We have agreements, understandings, and in this case with Australia, this Vuvale Union and the Veitacini Treaty.

The Union respects the decision of the sovereign government on what and who to entertain within its own sovereign territory. However, it is the responsibility of the State, in light of this Treaty, to understand the principles behind an agreement between two democratic States and what it envisages, understanding the reality of geopolitical competition within the region.

A foreign policy dictates that we are friends to everyone and do not have enemies in any area. Also being mindful that Fiji is a democratic State, and those areas where we partner in areas of defence and national security, must strengthen and reinforce the aspects of democracy in our country. Therefore, the way Fiji behaves into the future politically with regards to this Treaty, enhances Fiji's own political position with regards to partners, like Australia, that it has signed with, and respects the fact that we have all these other partners to whom we also partner with.

Fiji does not banish anyone at all. I do not see that this Treaty is going to affect that to that regard, except that there are certain principles that we uphold and value.

HON. V. LAL.- Deputy Chairperson, through you, on the Veitacini Treaty, how will the Ministry of Defence ensure that the intense Military-to-Military bonds between the two countries do not undermine the independent sovereign identity, domestic loyalty and professional autonomy of the RFMF?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- The important word in this relationship is 'partnership'. This union, Veitacini, mutually benefits both - it benefits Australia and benefits Fiji. It also respects the sovereignty of the RFMF *per se*. We have a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) that was signed back in October 2022. It guides the relationship between the two Defence Forces, particularly through the respect of Fijian laws and how Fijian defence and civilian will be treated in Australia.

In this area, primarily at the heart of it, is respect for the rule of law. We partner together, and there is a respect for sovereignty. We respect the fact that our partner, Australia, who is the other partner to this Treaty, have so much to offer, not only to Fiji, but also the region for that matter.

Fiji exercises what is offered according to our own sovereign integrity on what we take and what we wish to question. I do not see this at all, the Vuvale Treaty, undermining the RFMF's integrity with respect, either to the ADF or the intentions of the Government of Australia. In fact, I believe they are going to enhance it because I think one of the important issues to understand here is that Fiji's relationship in defence with Australia goes back a long way, hundreds of years. Only at this time, are we capturing it under the likes of a treaty, now the Veitacini Treatry in particular, that deals with national security and defence issues, but we go back in a long time – the First World War, Second World War, the Malayan Campaign, and later in the areas of peacekeeping, without any proper agreement or understanding.

Then we had the defence cooperation programme, which resumed after 1987 and since then, has continued to now. This had all been about partnering for a safer Fiji and a safer region. I think the processes are in order to allow each State to respect the other *per se*. There is also a process also entrusted in the Treaty that if either disagrees on something, then one will always initiate a conversation or a dialogue to resolve it.

HON. V. LAL.- Deputy Chairperson, through you, does that mean, Sir, that the visiting Australian Military personnel operating on Fijian soil remain subject to the criminal and civil jurisdiction of Fiji's domestic courts, or will they be granted sovereign immunity from local prosecution?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- There is no immunity from any local prosecution. There is a specific provision on criminality. They are subjected to Fijian laws.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Deputy Chairperson, through you, *bula vinaka*, Sir. Thank you for coming before the Committee with your high-power delegation this morning. It shows the importance of this Treaty and what is before the Committee.

I did raise this same question with the Permanent Secretary of the Office of the Prime Minister yesterday. Fiji is yet to accede to this Treaty, yet Australia is already pouring in millions of dollars into various Ministries and Departments in Fiji. I did mention these words; "only in the Pacific, we make our canoe and sail our canoe at the same time". This is in view of Australia already pouring in money ahead of this Treaty. Does that mean that it is trying to buy into our sovereign jurisdiction and also in terms of the geopolitical shift in the Pacific?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Thank you for the question, honourable Member. Let me say again, in answer to the first question with regards to the overarching relationship between Fiji and Australia through this Treaty, which is partnership. We are in this together. Previously, I mentioned that this partnership is based on a relationship of around 100 years, where Australia has been helping Fiji well before this Treaty. I think the Parliament of Fiji is also a very big beneficiary of Australian aid, assisting us to protect the way we carry out our democracy within our own parliamentary processes.

In the other sectors, Australia has always been a donor and a funder of development, other than in the area of defence. However, I think defence has been one of the longest-standing beneficiaries of cooperation between Fiji and Australia, both in monetary terms and in other areas of infrastructure, capacity and capability where Australia has helped.

The reality of geopolitical competition is that no other country in the Pacific, I believe, is more evident than in Fiji. Fiji is full of influence, but I think it is also a blessing in that regard that Fiji is able to be recognised for the stature at which it holds within the region. In recognition of that, almost every country of the world is based here, including the United Nations, multilateral organisations and civil society, including countries.

I think they all capture the central idea that Fiji is essential to the peaceful coexistence of everyone in this region, and Australia is one of our greatest partners in that regard. It is not really, in my view, that it is well to shape geopolitical competition, however, it helps Fiji primarily in some of those areas that I have already mentioned, particularly, in the areas of national security. I mentioned things, such as the patrol boats and buildings, that will benefit RFMF and other institutions outside of defence and national security.

How it is viewed within competing powers in the region is a matter for them, in my view, but we, in Fiji, and I am a very strong believer in this, we are in a position to be able to choose what is in the best interest of our nation. The Government of Fiji has determined that both, the Veitacini Treaty and the Vuvale Union, are in our good interest. It enhances partners of similar nature in democracy and values, and those are things that we believe to protect here. I think it is important to understand that geopolitical competition is never going to go away. It will only become stronger, as long as we have the initiative and we understand what is in our best interest and I think this Treaty is in our best interest in our partnership between Australia and Fiji.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Just a follow-up question; what if, in time, when there is a change of government, how will it affect the Treaty or the operationalisation of the agreement between the two countries?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- It could because that is a matter of choice of the Fijian Government and its people. This Treaty is intended for what we could do together in these areas over the next 10 years and because of sovereignty issues as well. I had mentioned this, I think, at the very end of my presentation, that this is subjected to the decisions of future governments as they come. I would hope that they will recognise that this is something that will benefit Fiji going into the future, particularly, on our status in the region and how well we can look after our own people and our relationship with Australia.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- I will talk about the Australia and Fiji Vuvale Union. Is this really where Fiji's interest lies or basically, is it that we have realised our weakness, which is the gaps with our border agencies, and we are severely losing the battle against the transnational crimes and these have penetrated into the DNA of our society and our youth? Is it that Fiji needs this more, or Australia needs this more? Who needs this Union more?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- I will go back to the word I used which is 'partnership', so the benefit is to both. There is, no doubt, how Fiji will benefit from here and that is the benefit to our people. A lot of the benefits that are there under the existing partnerships that are not included here, actually benefit both.

It is unfortunate that Fiji is such a large archipelagic State. It is absolutely impossible to dominate every single space within Fiji's archipelago. I talked about our Maritime Security Strategy, which I am going to present after this, and everything that enters our country comes through the maritime domain, whether it is through air surface or sub surface. We literally just do not have the capacity to dominate every space, which makes us a very vulnerable State. Australia, in its own right, is vulnerable, like every other island of the Pacific.

The idea of looking after our region is something that everyone is responsible for, and partnership is important. This partnership is important to TNOC for us, and some of the capability, as I referred to earlier, the UAV, uncrewed in our surface vessels, additional surface platforms. One of those Guardian-class patrol boats cost about AUD30 million, and we do not have that kind of money all the time, and we are not the only beneficiaries of that. The capacity is around including the MESC to give us a better visibility of our own space around here, and it also has the capability and the potential to look after our island neighbours and our relatives within the Pacific, which is what it is already doing anyway.

Within our own, perhaps, the vulnerability, Fiji has traditionally and through search and rescue, we are also responsible for countries such as Kiribati, Tuvalu, which is a very big sea space, using our own three boats, rescuing people who are drowning in other areas and also within their own drug threats. It is not about who it benefits more - it definitely benefits our partnership, not only in an area which deals with security only, but in economics and all those social issues that the partnership with Australia is already benefiting Fiji and the region.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- So, $1.5 billion in 10 years is what Australia would be putting into this. What would be Fiji's contribution?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Fiji's contribution in the area of TNOC, if you look at the budget allocation as well, we have the development plans that Government has put together, going forward, covering all the major sectors. We are funding our own. Obviously, every government has gaps in the budget. Australia fills in that gap, and it started from the previous government and is continuing until now.

As long as there are international threats to our own existence and our own security in the region, this partnership always comes in for us, so there are benefits to it. We are not beggars going into this, for want of a better word. It is together - they bring their strengths, we bring our own and together, we work to protect our own people and our region.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Following up on that, with this Australia-Fiji Vuvale Union, how will the RFMF strengthen its credibility, institutional integrity, greater transparency and accountability?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Yes, primarily, this is the overarching issue. The Australian Defence Force is a defence force of a sovereign democratic State. The RFMF is a Defence Force of a sovereign democratic State, like Fiji. We have lost our way throughout, and we are coming back in.

We have all heard what the Commander has said. He is strongly supportive of this Union, particularly the Veitacini Treaty, and the overarching element of this Union. The best way to learn from people-to-people relationship, is understanding that Defence Forces submit themselves to political power. This is the commitment, really, that this Government has made. It has captured this in many of our commitments and utterances.

I have mentioned it publicly that the RFMF is a force for a democratic nation. It submits itself to the will of the people and the will of Parliament. That is something that we are learning for a long time. We have worked hard in these last three years to make this come true and strong. Then what a better way to learn and understand how Defence Forces function in a democratic setting than to learn also from a strong Defence Force of a democratic State and that is how Veitacini Treaty can help us.

I want to publicly state that the RFMF, through the Commander, has made these commitments for democracy going forward in respect of the rule of law and this Treaty is going to enhance the capability and the strength of the RFMF to continue to allow to serve people into the future in a democratic fashion.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Sir, you have just spoke about democratic values and fashion and thank you for the work that has been put in because that uniform carries years of pride and integrity, yet things have been done before which should not have been. If RFMF wants to keep the rule of law in the country and governments come and go, would RFMF entertain governments who break or breach constitutions in the future? What is changing, since you spoke about democratic values upholding the rule of law?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- I think the role of the RFMF is quite clear, Deputy Chairperson. It is here to look after the sovereignty of the democratic State of Fiji. The matters of governance are the matters of the State, and there is a separation of powers pertaining to the responsibilities of different arms of the State - the Executive, the Legislature and Parliament. They all have powers.

The role of the RFMF is to respect the powers of the State. It does not condone, and this is what we are trying to do - the RFMF must not intervene on matters where the arms of the State are doing their job and allowing the process of the rule of law to take place. This is the commitment that it is making. Of course, it allows for dialogue and talk in between the Government and the State and the Military as an institution of the State.

When it comes to politics, the RFMF, going forward, that commitment is already made - it leaves the matter of the political leadership of this nation to the politicians, and the politicians must

decide that amongst themselves. In terms of the rule of law and the defence of our country, that is the matter for RFMF to support the Police in that matter.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Furthermore, for years, we have seen that the Navy which covers almost 1.3 million square kilometres of our EEZ, yet every trade transaction or the transnational crimes happens on our waters. With this funding and for the future annual budgets, are we going to see an increment for our Navy because I believe they have more areas to cover which is very costly?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- I have said earlier that Fiji is a maritime space. The Republic of Fiji Navy is the capability within our defence services that leads the role in that regard. I had spoken earlier about Forward Pperating Bases (FOBs). I was in Labasa last weekend and with the help of Australia and Japan, we are setting up Malau as one of our FOBs for our Navy, going forward. We will see one in the Eastern Division, and that has yet to be decided, and we already have one here in Suva, and a centre in the West in time. The Navy, as you have said, is going to be a major beneficiary of this Treaty.

HON. V. LAL.- Deputy Chairperson, through you, I can see that Article 4(6) of the FijiAustralia Vuvale Unionreads that Fiji will coordinate with Australia to strengthen Artificial Intelligence, cyberspace and quantum computing. What protocols will the Ministry of Defence establish to protect Fiji's sovereign military data and intelligence from foreign monitoring or interception?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- I mentioned in my report about cyber, so this is the area that we are primarily using. Nationally, of course, much of this is going to go through the Vuvale Union, through the Ministry of Communications and how they build that through ITC and all those other areas. I will let them answer the technical areas with regard to that. However, electronic security and all these areas, a lot of these are already ongoing. There is a lot of things that we are doing to enhancing security digitally and electronically. One primary area where RFMF will benefit is through the area of cyber security – looking at our own system and how we use the systems within Defence to assist Government generally.

HON. V. LAL.- Adding to that, Deputy Chairperson, given the severe administrative resource differences between Fiji and Australia, and we all know that, how will the Ministry ensure that Fiji's security interests are not overshadowed?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- That is the whole idea behind it, to enhance Fiji's security. The whole benefits of the assistance and I am talking about cyber here, primarily in digital security, is for the security of Fiji, more than it is for Australia. They help us to build our capacity, and the RFMF is already practising it. We still have to do a lot of work here at the Ministry of Defence Headquarters in these areas that I am talking about but I am sure within these 10 years, or

hopefully within the immediate future, of those who are going to be running this programme, will consider looking at this and how well they can implement it.

HON. V. LAL.- What I am trying to say here is, because they will have access to each and every information about Fiji, so will that be abused somehow, or shared with parties which we are not connected to, perhaps?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- No, I think that is a false assumption, honourable Member. The issue is sovereignty. Remember, I said partnership - it is mutual. There are areas and things that we share. There are things that are up to us, and we actually have the initiative on a lot of these.

Obviously, we are not stopping any other country that we deal with in partnership in acquiring their own kind of information. However, on how we are going to benefit in information sharing, we have our own system that protects the integrity of our own. We are not dishing them out on a silver platter and making everything available for Fiji to everyone. There is a respect for that, and that is already guiding the way that we share information at present. We share what we have to, but essential information that is for Fijian consumption alone is for Fiji only.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Through you, Deputy Chairperson, Fiji's history has shown the display of superpowers and extreme powers by RFMF. How will this play out? I refer to Article 12(3) on veto power and strategic expansion. Article 12(3) permits other Pacific States to join the Treaty only by unanimous consent. What strategic criteria will the Ministry of Defence use to evaluate potential new signatories?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- That is part of the Government.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- The partnership is between Australia and Fiji. What if other countries become signatories, so how will Fiji handle the situation while Australia wishes to admit a State that Fiji views as geo-strategically sensitive?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Any addition to this partnership, both parties need to agree to include any other country within the region that wants to become part of this agreement. If there was another country other than Fiji and Australia that wants to join this Ocean Peace Alliance, then it is up to Fiji and Australia to agree to it. For instance, if Tonga wants to join, so we have to go to Australia and say that Tonga wants to join. What are the peculiarities about Tonga or any other State for that matter? What it has allowed is for any other member of the region that wants to join, but with the mutual consent of both Fiji and Australia, who are the initial signatories.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you very much, honourable Minister and PS, as well as Officials from RFMF for your opening statement and for answering all the questions the Committee had.

I wish to sincerely thank the representatives of the Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs and the Republic of the Fiji Military Forces for availing themselves for this meeting. We appreciate your time and cooperation, Sir, and we look forward to your continued engagement should the Committee require any further information.

On that note, I declare this meeting closed.

The Committee meeting adjourned at 10.01 a.m.

Ministry of Policing and Communications

[VERBATIM REPORT]

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

UNION/TREATY

(1) FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION
(2) OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE (VEITACINI TREATY)

ENTITY: (1) Ministry of Policing and Communications ,
(2) Fiji Police Force

VENUE: Big Committee Room (East Wing)
DATE: Thursday, 3rd September, 2026

VERBATIM REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE HELD AT THE COMMITTEE ROOM (EAST WING), PARLIAMENT PRECINCTS, GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, ON THURSDAY, 3RD SEPTEMBER, 2026, AT 10.14 A.M.

Present

Hon. R.R. Sharma	-	Deputy Chairperson
Hon. P.K. Ravunawa	-	Member
Hon. I. Tuiwailevu	-	Member
Hon. V. Lal	-	Member

Apologies

Hon. L.S. Qereqeretabua	-	Chairperson
Hon T.R. Matasawalu	-	Member

The Committee resumed at 10.14 a.m.

Submittee: (1) Ministry of Policing and Communications

(2) Fiji Police Force

In Attendance:

(1) Mr. Berenado Daveta - Permanent Secretary
(2) Mr. Aporosa Lutunauga - Deputy Commissioner Operations
(3) Mrs Tupou Baravilala - Director General for Communications
(4) Mr. Ponijese Bainimoli - Director ITC

(Opening remarks by Deputy Chairperson and brief overview of the Committee's mandate, purpose of meeting and meeting procedures, as well as introduction of Committee Members)

I now invite the representatives from the Ministry of Policing and Communications to introduce themselves and proceed with their submission. You have 15 minutes for your opening statement, and we will have questions from the Committee Members afterwards. Kindly note that the microphone should be turned on before you speak and turned off

immediately after speaking to avoid any disruption to the live submission. Please, proceed, the floor is yours.

(Introduction of Ministry of Policing and Communications Officials)

MR. B. DAVETA.- I would like to thank the Committee for inviting us today, giving us the opportunity to appear before the Committee and present our submission on the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance or Veitacini Treaty.

The Ministry of Policing and Communications has a substantial interest in this Union and Treaty because many of their most significant commitments fall directly within or intersect with our responsibilities for policing transnational organised crime and illicit drugs, border and maritime security, cyber security, telecommunications, digital transformation, critical infrastructure, protection and national security policy.

Before moving into the Ministry's role, and the development and proposed implementation of the Treaties, I would like to briefly place them within the global regional and national security environment we face now and into the future. Globally, we are living through what has been described as an era of perma-crisis or the never normal, where yesterday's institutions and ways of working may no longer be sufficient for tomorrow.

The international environment is becoming more contested, interconnected and technologically disruptive. Geopolitical competition is intensifying. Wars and instability are placing pressure on international rules-based systems. Supply chains, food, and energy security remain vulnerable, and artificial intelligence and other technologies are advancing faster than many governments and laws can adapt.

At the same time, boundaries of national security have fundamentally changed.

At the same time, boundaries of national security have fundamentally changed. A cyberattack can disrupt banking, telecommunications, aviation, electricity, or government services without crossing a physical border. Transnational criminal organisations now operate as sophisticated international enterprises, using encrypted communications, digital finance, legitimate businesses, and global shipping networks, to move drugs, people, weapons, and illicit money across jurisdictions.

In the Pacific, these pressures are magnified by our geography and vulnerabilities. The Pacific Security Outlook 2026 describes a regional poly-crisis, with climate change remaining the single greatest threat to Pacific security and prosperity, while occurring alongside increasing

transnational crime, cybersecurity threats, geopolitical competition, and pressure on the international rules-based system.

For Fiji, these threats are no longer over the horizon - they are already here. Our position as a regional transport, financial, maritime and digital hub brings enormous opportunity, but it also exposes us to international criminal networks and other emerging threats. Illicit drugs and transnational organised crimes are, therefore, no longer policing issues. Left unchecked, they can penetrate our borders, financial system, communities and institutions, contributing to corruption, money laundering, public health problems and, ultimately, undermining public trust and national stability.

As a large ocean State, Fiji must also strengthen maritime surveillance, intelligence, forward presence, and interagency coordination. As we become increasingly digital, cybersecurity and protection of critical infrastructure are now inseparable from national security. Climate change and natural disasters compound all of these pressures by threatening infrastructure, communications, food security, essential services and communities, simultaneously.

In this never-normal global environment, Fiji must develop dynamic capabilities, the capability to anticipate, adapt, coordinate and respond, rather than waiting for a crisis before reorganising ourselves, and underpinning all of these is trust. Trust, in itself, is a strategic national asset. Our institutions must, therefore, be agile, resilient, intelligence-led and technologically capable, but they must also remain accountable and trusted by the people we serve.

For Fiji, this requires a fundamental shift from reaction to anticipation, from agency silos to whole-of-government coordination, from isolated national capability to trusted regional partnerships, and from security being the responsibility of security agencies alone to becoming a whole-of-nation responsibility. It is against this security environment that the Treaties we are discussing today, must be understood. They are more than diplomatic instruments. Properly implemented, they provide Fiji with an opportunity to strengthen our capability, resilience, partnerships and strategic depth, necessary to protect our sovereignty, our democracy, our people, and our national interest in an increasingly uncertain world.

Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, Australia's commitment across the three pillars of the Vuvale Union represents a significant expansion of existing cooperation, backed by a new investment of more than $1.5 billion over a decade, comprising approximately FJD1.5 billion in grants and $550 million in concessional loans. For the Ministry, the significance is, therefore, not simply the amount of assistance involved - it is the opportunity to convert a longstanding bilateral relationship into enduring national capability.

Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, against that security context, let me now turn to the Treaties themselves and what they mean in practical terms for the Ministry of Policing and Communications.

Article 1 provides this strategic anchor. The Vuvale Union seeks to protect the ocean peace, strengthen our collective security, stability and prosperity, protects sovereignty and democracy, and reinforces Pacific solidarity. The Veitacini Treaty complements this by protecting sovereignty and mutual security, as well contributing to the stability and security of the Pacific. These purposes directly intersect with the Ministry's mandate for policing, drug enforcement, cybersecurity, digital transformation, telecommunications and online safety, while the Fiji Police Force's responsibility is maintaining law and order, preserving peace, protecting life and property, preventing and detecting crimes, and enforcing the law.

I, therefore, see the two Treaties as complementary. The Vuvale Union builds Fiji's national capability and resilience. The Veitacini Treaty provides the highest strategic framework for sovereignty, mutual security and collective defence. The important question is, therefore, what capability will Fiji actually build?

I would group implementation into five principal security areas, as follows:

(1) Transnational Serious and Organised Crime and Illicit Drugs

This is the largest direct security investment with FJD284 million committed towards combating transnational crime and illicit drugs, including uplifting the Fiji Police Force (FPF) and strengthening our ability to intercept illicit shipments before they reach Fiji. This funding must support the Government's recently approved National Coordination of Transnational Serious and Organised Crime and Illicit Drug Enforcement Policy in Fiji. At the centre of that architecture is the National Joint Enforcement Centre that will fuse intelligence from Police, Customs, Immigration, the Counter-Narcotics Bureau, the RFMF, and other agencies; identify criminal networks, coordinate joint operational planning, and support interdiction and disruption.

The Australian Federal Police co-operation is expected to strengthen this capability through intelligence-led policing specialist advisors, digital forensics, surveillance, secure communications, financial crime, counter-narcotics expertise and operational mentoring.

The supporting proposal also identifies integrated case management, digital evidence platforms, and intelligence databases as priorities. The ultimate objective is not

simply more arrests or larger seizures, it is to identify, disrupt and, ultimately, dismantle the organised criminal networks operating behind the illicit drug trade.

Australia is also supporting a 10-year FPF uplift programme, focusing on leadership and human resources, ethics and integrity, operational and enabling capabilities, strategy and planning. Already identified support includes Police Mobile Force equipment, uniforms, digital forensic capability, transnational crime unit equipment and vehicles, station refurbishment and continuing cyber capability uplift.

Australia and the AFP are also scoping a permanent Fiji Police Headquarters, presently estimated at approximately AUD$75 million, together with a proposed Centre of Excellence for Forensics. These are not simply buildings and equipment; they are investments in Fiji's sovereign law enforcement capability.

(2) <u>Border and Maritime Security - Securing Our Borders and Maritime Approaches</u>

Article 4 specifically provides for integrated policing, defence, and border protection. Australia's assistance includes strengthened container screening at Suva and Lautoka, intelligence sharing, passenger and cargo risk assessment and modern border management capability.

Future developments should include biometrics, advanced passenger information, risk analytics and greater interoperability between the FPF, Immigration, and Customs. The Australian Border Force Officers continually conduct integrated border control training for Customs, Police, Immigration, Biosecurity, and Health Officials.

However, Fiji is also a large ocean State, and our border begins far beyond our wharves and airports. The implementation programme will also strengthen the Maritime Essential Services Centre (MESC) as the principal maritime information, surveillance and coordination hub, connecting maritime intelligence with operational assets.

Four Maritime Police Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) at Lakeba, Savusavu, Denarau and Levuka had also been proposed to be supported by four appropriate maritime patrol vessels. This would give Police a permanent forward presence closer to our maritime communities and vulnerable approaches. Police would lead coastal and territorial water policing, supported by community-based maritime vigilance, resilience and intelligence.

Further offshore, the Fiji Navy assists in policing the outer territorial waters and patrols Fiji's vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) with information and operational coordination through the MESC. In simple terms, communities become our eyes and ears; MESC builds the maritime picture; intelligence identify the threat; and Police and Navy assets provide operational response. This gives Fiji a layered maritime security system from the villages' shoreline to the outer limits of our EEZ.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Sir, I would have to interrupt. As I stated, I have only given you 15 minutes. I will give you five more minutes. Please, sum it up so that the Committee can ask questions. Perhaps then, you could highlight the things that you have here because it is quite long and we are limited with time as another Committee needs to take up this space.

MR. B. DAVETA.- Thank you, Deputy Chairperson.

(3) Vuvale Package of $146.3 Million Towards Fiji's Digital Transition

For the Ministry, implementation would concentrate on several national capabilities. Currently, we have established the National Computer Emergency Response Team under the leadership of an Australian consultant.

The CERT capability will also be strengthened and expanded into a National Cybersecurity Agency, which will provide dedicated centralised oversight of national cybersecurity functions to protect Fiji's cyberspace, support national security and power our digital economy.

Under the Vuvale Union, the Ministry will progress the development of a comprehensive cybersecurity legislation, providing the legal foundation in national cyber governance, institutional responsibilities, and protection of Fiji's cyberspace.

Digital integration must strengthen and not dilute Fiji's digital sovereignty. Fiji will retain appropriate ownership, governance and control over sovereign government data wherever recovery infrastructure is located.

A further important component of the $146.3 million digital transition package is the transformation of Government itself. The Vuvale Union recognised Fiji's transition towards a digital economy, supported by safe, secure and interoperable digital infrastructure.

The Australian Digital Transformation Consultant is currently embedded within the Ministry, working alongside our digital transformation team to strengthen Fiji's capability and support implementations. Significantly, preparatory work has already been undertaken. The Ministry has mapped 788 Government services for progressive digital transformation and is now working across Ministries and agencies to prepare and standardise their data for onboarding into the data exchange platform already developed by the Ministry.

Digital governance is foundation upon which Fiji can progressively build a digital economy and a national digital ID. Secured digital ID, interoperable government data digital payments, and integrated service delivery platforms can create the enabling infrastructure for business to transact more efficiently, encourage innovation and investment, expand financial inclusion, and also new digital industries and services to develop.

(4) Building an Adaptive Technology Workforce

Digital transformation will also succeed if Fiji develops the people and skills capable of sustaining it. Therefore, within the decade, we intend to deliberately build an adaptive technology workforce, recognising that lifelong skills development cannot rest solely on the individual.

It must be a shared responsibility between government businesses, employers, and workers, educational training centres and other enabling institutions. This will require strong tripartite collaboration, better anticipation of emerging industry needs, and much closer relationship with employers and learning providers. Government must also use its funding, regulatory and quality assurance levers more strategically to ensure the training response to future economic demand, rather as yesterday's labour market.

(5) Artificial Intelligence As Another Important Enabler of Fiji's Development

Properly applied Artificial Intelligence (AI) can improve productivity, strengthen decision making, support innovation and fundamentally change our Government and businesses to deliver service. The Ministry is consequently working towards AI policy for Government in establishing principles and governance arrangements for the responsible usage of AI across the Civil Service. This can subsequently provide the foundation for an AI impact programme, aimed at driving broader and deeper adoption of AI by enterprises and workers across the economy.

Towards a Fiji Smart Nation: These initiatives come together around a broader aspiration using technology deliberately to improve the lives of our people and build a thriving digital future for all Fijians. I would frame our smart nation ambition around three simple outcomes. A smart nation that helps us grow, a smart nation that we can trust, and a smart nation that keeps us together. This is the dream that we are pursuing. The goals become our compass; technology in the service of people; innovation anchored in trust; and digital transformation directed, ultimately, towards improving citizens' lives.

Critical Infrastructure and Protective Security: The Vuvale Union specifically recognises ports, telecommunications, freshwater infrastructure, critical health infrastructure, aviation, energy, digital infrastructure, artificial intelligence, and cyberspace as critical infrastructure technology. The broader package provides $57.5 million towards economic security, including critical infrastructure investments, screening, diversification, and supply chain resilience. The Ministry will use this opportunity to develop Fiji's first comprehensive critical infrastructure policy, supported by security of critical infrastructure in information legislation.

Pacific-Led Security and National Resilience: These investments must strengthen Fiji's contribution to regional security. The Treaties complement rather than duplicate existing Pacific-led mechanisms, including the Pacific Islands Chief of Police, the Pacific Policing Initiative, and regional law enforcement cooperation. The package also identifies $35 million for an Ocean of Peace Centre, working with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and regional partners to advance the Ocean of Peace Declaration.

Deputy Chairperson, however, there are four principles that guide our implementation:

(1) <u>Sovereignty</u>
Every programme must strengthen Fiji's decision-making and sovereign capability.

(2) Constitutional Responsibility

Integrated policing, defence and border protection does not make Police and Military functions interchangeable. Corporation must respect Fiji's constitution, legislation and established command responsibility.

(3) Sustainability

Australia can provide infrastructure, technology and initial capability, but Fiji must progressively provide the people, operating budget, maintenance, training and life cycle replacements necessary to sustain them.

(4) Measurable Outcomes

Every dollar must be connected to an activity, a responsible agency and implementation timeframe and a measurable national security outcome.

The objective cannot be permanent dependency. - the objective must be deliberate capability transfer so that over time, Fijians increasingly operate, sustain and lead the systems themselves.

Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, the financial commitments are substantial –

- $284 million to combat transnational crime and illicit drugs;
- $146.3 million towards Fiji's digital transition;
- $57.5 million towards economic security and critical infrastructure;
- $85 million towards the Ocean of Peace Centre; and together with the proposed
- $75 million Fiji Police Headquarters and significant AFP investment in Police cyber forensics and transnational crime capability.

Ultimately, the success of this Treaty should not be measured by how much money Australia spends - it should be measured by what capability Fiji possesses when that investment is complete –

- a professional and trusted Police Force;
- the ability to dismantle transnational criminal drug networks, secure borders and maritime approaches;
- protected telecommunication and critical infrastructure;
- a resilient national cyber security system;
- secure and sovereign government data;
- future-ready legislation and institutions; and
- a viable strong digital infrastructure that can support a broad digital economy ecosystem that will enable e-commerce, precision agriculture and other industries, as well as the algorithm industry in the future.

We pursue a Fiji that is increasingly capable of protecting its own sovereignty, while contributing confidently to the peace and security of our Pacific family.

That, Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members of the Committee, is how the Ministry of Policing and Communications intends to translate 'Vuvale' and 'Veitacini' from words in Treaties into sovereign national capability over the next decade, strengthening Fiji's security, resilience and sovereignty, while giving practical meaning to our shared vision of the Pacific as an Ocean of Peace. *Vinaka, saka,vakalevu*.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- *Vinaka*, Sir. I will now open the floor for questions from the Committee.

HON. V. LAL.- Thank you, PS, for your comprehensive presentation. I will take you back to digital infrastructure and that is Article 3(5) of the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union Treaty. Acceding to this Treaty, does it mean that Fiji will have to adopt the Australian designed cyber security? If so, does it not mean that this will make Fiji's national communication networks entirely dependent on Australian technology?

MR. B. DAVETA.- The principle that we are following, as I have mentioned, is that we protect our sovereignty. In terms of concepts and whatever we bring over from abroad, we will need to contextualise it to our own situation. That means, we need to start with proper research of our local situation and have a wide consultation with our own stakeholders and our people, to ensure that they are on board in all the decisions that are being made in regard to what form of digitalisation we are going to take. There will be generic areas that we need to put in place. I think our team here may want to add on to what I have said.

MS. T. BARAVILALA.- Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members of the Committee, *bula vinaka*. Just to add on, our digital transformation journey is quite recent, but we have made a lot of strides. We have not only looked at Australia, but we have looked at other countries as well. We have looked at what the global frameworks are when it comes to digital transformation. For us, it is looking at what has worked, what has not worked in other countries, including Australia, and then contextualising that in terms of the foundational components that we have in Fiji.

As we are moving forward, we are definitely looking at the global norms, but at the end of the day, it is what is internationally recognised, and then which countries can we look at to be able to develop our own national frameworks and standards, but that is definitely a partner that we have been working with when it comes to not just digital transformation, but cybersecurity as well.

HON. V. LAL.- Thank you for your answer but I think the main concern of our Fijians is, will the Ministry be able to protect the privacy and data rights of Fijian citizens? That is what I am asking.

MR. B. DAVETA.- Yes, definitely, we would be able to do that. At the moment, we are MR. B. DAVETA.- Yes, we can. At present, we are working on a data protection legislation to ensure that privacy of data is protected. We are now being assisted by a consultant from the

Council of Europe. He comes and does consultations with us, and we do verify that whatever comes from him, and he recommends is contextualised to our situation.

HON. V. LAL.- So, that will be part of this Treaty, is it?

MR. B. DAVETA.- No, it has been ongoing. We have partners also with the European Council. It is not directly part of this Treaty here, but there are aspects that later on, may be funded in some of these funds that we are getting from the Australian Government.

MS. T. BARAVILALA.- Deputy Chairperson, if I may add for further information, in terms of the data protection work, it is already under our Constitution. Section 24 already has that in terms of right to privacy under the Bill of Rights and protection of communications. We do have sectorial laws that already provide for it under our current laws.

What we are looking at is a comprehensive data protection law. Last year, Cabinet had endorsed the National Privacy and Personal Data Protection Policy that outlines eight key principles. The Council of Europe, as our partner has come in because internationally, the binding treaty on data protection is Convention 108 and Convention 108 plus. The Policy that we have and the law that we are drafting aligns to that international standard. That is the gold standard when it comes to data protection, and that is the policy already in place that Cabinet has endorsed and it is already there. We are currently in the process of development of that role, so we have the Council of Europe that is partnering with us on that.

Prior to that, in terms of the digital transformation work that we have been doing, we have incorporated data protection provisions by design in terms of the work that we have already carried out, and that is aligned to what Australia has as well. That will be embedded in terms of the discussions moving forward and as already highlighted in the Treaty, in terms of ensuring the security and the data protection. Those embedded safeguards are in there. That is, definitely, a top priority and has already been highlighted. That is part of the implementation and the design work that we are doing as well.

HON. V. LAL.- I really know what you are saying, but the thing is, when I was going through this Treaty, what I read somewhere is that this bars us from external arbitration. We cannot go to court or things like that. What happens if there is a major dispute that arises over cyber breach or data leakage, how will the Ministry seek neutral legal recourse?

For clarity, I can see that in Article 8(2), resolving disputes over shared policy data of the Treaty, where it says that strictly, dispute arising under the Treaty shall not be referred to any national or international tribunal or court of any other third party for resolution. This is where

I am coming from. This is in Article 8(2) of the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union, which talks about resolving disputes over shared policy data.

MR. B. DAVETA.- I think this part of the Treaty that you mentioned is specifically for the Treaty itself. It is very little to do with the Government data and all that. That is covered under our own laws. My understanding is that this is about this Treaty, this document, whereas for data protection, et cetera, that is covered under our laws.

HON. V. LAL.- This is talking about the disputes within the two parties involved in the Treaty.

MR. B. DAVETA.- Perhaps, it would be good to get the Office of the Solicitor-General to do the interpretation of this because my understanding during the Treaty's negotiation, it is to do with the document itself and laws that our various countries have, we go by that in terms of whatever is covered under the law.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- I will add on; the Permanent Secretary for the Office of the Prime Minister told us that consultations are done with line Ministries. That does not seem to happen with your institution. This is why the Committee is sitting today to ask from the various stakeholders regarding these Articles. This is looking at all the agencies when it comes to border control. That is our understanding.

MR. B. DAVETA.- Yes, consultations were done within the Ministry. However, as I have said, our understanding is that this part is only for the Treaty document that is here and all that. Whatever on data or anything that is covered by our own laws, that is respected by the Treaty. We deal with everything according to our laws.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Through you, Deputy Chairperson, perhaps, the submittees can also look at Article 10(6) later on to assist with the dispute resolution in this Vuvale Treaty. However, the Ocean of Peace Centre will be based here in Suva, according to my reading. My question to you is on the data storage of the Cyber Unit. Will it be based locally or externally? How will the Ministry of Communications be able to confirm to the Committee the security of the data storage and the location of it?

MR. B. DAVETA.- In terms of cybersecurity data storage, at present, the Government has a directive that all Government information and data are to be stored at our Data Centre that is looked after by Mr. Bainimoli.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- A follow-up question on that first before Mr. Bainimoli; in your presentation, you mentioned about the recovery infrastructure location. Are you still looking into that?

MR. B. DAVETA.- Yes, on the recovery infrastructure, there have been talks that because of cyclones and other natural disasters that might occur in Fiji, is for it to be placed in Australia. There is no decision on that as yet, we are still considering options on what would be best thing to do. If it is going to be housed in Australia, how do we still manage, own and have control over that data centre. That is what we are looking at, at the moment. As of now, everything goes to the Data Centre here.

MR. P. BAINIMOLI.- Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, to further elaborate on what PS has said, there was a Cabinet directive that all Government data must be stored at the Government Data Centre. We are currently working on security with other Government Ministries and Departments in having that done.

In terms of the DR, as the Permanent Secretary mentioned, we are currently looking for a permanent one, but we have a DR at the moment which is located off site at the Government Data Centre. We also have a DR server within the Data Centre that is doing backup on the production that is currently running. Apart from that, we also have a DR offsite in the event of any disaster, at the

Government Data Centre. We also have backups stored on tapes that is offsite at the Ministry of Communications. There had been works done to look for a permanent location where we need to put our permanent DR.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- My question is in terms of affordability. In some instances, PS, I hope you are aware, I think Police Officers are struggling to fuel their vehicles because the fuel cards are blocked, yet we are talking about a 10-year plan here. Can we afford the maintenance of this data infrastructure and security going forward when we are struggling with minor things within the Force? How would the Force prioritise its budget in the coming years to ensure we live up to every line in this Treaty?

MR. B. DAVETA.- Perhaps, I will leave the question for the Deputy Commissioner of Police Operations regarding the Police side of things.

MR. A. LUTUNAUGA.- Good morning, Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members. Before I answer the question, please, allow me to give a brief background on how the Vuvale Treaty supports the Fiji Police Force.

The Vuvale Treaty formalises the partnership between the Australian Federal Police (AFP) and the Fiji Police Force (FPF). It has already been in existence and is now being formalised. The Treaty elevates policy collaboration to treaty level, ensuring long-term commitment, security, economic and people-to-people ties, with a strong focus on policing cooperation, regional stability and resource allocation.

Deputy Chairperson, there are five key provisions under this partnership that are embedded with the AFP Officers within the FPF, and they are border security investments, combating transnational crime, technology, ICT modernisation and regional integration.

To briefly break it up into the three levels/areas which this Treaty has penetrated, at the executive level, there are two areas that we are looking at:

(1) Uplift Programme

A strategic reform initiative which is supported by the AFP to enhance the operational effectiveness of the FPF and restore public trust. The programme is structured around key institutional pillars, as explained by the PS, which includes Leadership, human resources, ethics and integrity, operational and enabling capabilities, strategic strategy and planning and communications.

Australia has committed funding for the next 10 years under the Vuvale partnership for this particular component.

(2) Regional Integration

The FPF participates in regional initiatives and joint activities with other Pacific policing partners, such as the Pacific Islands Chief of Police (PICP), Pacific Policing Initiatives and the Pacific Community for Law Enforcement Cooperation to assist in developing regional policing capability and enhancing interoperability with other Pacific forces.

(3) Operational Level

This is only broken down into the capacity building and capability development of the FPF. The Treaty has committed to enhance training, leadership, development and operational standards for the FPF. The AFP Officers are embedded within the FPF to provide operational mentoring and technical expertise.

The Australian Government has also committed the funding and development support for the next four years to build a permanent headquarters for the FPF. At many times we have brought this issue up to this Committee in regard to our headquarters, however, FPF is very

grateful for this Vuvale Treaty which has enabled them to fund our own permanent Police headquarters, so for the:

(1) Centre for Forensics – the scoping is underway through the AFP Infrastructure Team; and.
(2) Technical level – commitment to capability and capacity building towards technical units, including automobile assistance for specialised units.

These are some of the issues that we have already raised to this Committee in the previous years, but it has been fully realised with the support of the Australian Government through this Treaty:

(1) Improve the ability to intercept illicit goods and combat smuggling at Fiji's borders and ports of entry – Australia has committed funds to strengthen container screening at Lautoka and Suva Ports, strengthening Fiji's ability to intercept illicit goods.

(2) Stronger tools to fight drug trafficking and organised crime – Funding has been committed to support intelligence sharing surveillance and a joint operation to disrupt drug networks and organised crime. Pacific Transnational Crime Summit co-hosted between the AFP and the FPF was held in Fiji to align tactical response against drug syndicates and cartel trafficking illicit commodities through the Pacific.

(3) Investment on modern ICT systems to improve efficiency and data security and border management.

(4) At the technical level, the AFP has administered funding support for the Fiji Police Mobile Force to be spread out for the next six years, commencing in 2026.

(5) Transnational Crime Unit, digital forensics, uniform, boots provision and customised automobiles for the FPF. These are under this Vuvale partnership.

Deputy Chairperson, to sum it up, the strategic implications of this Vuvale partnership supports national security, which reinforced Fiji's sovereignty and resilience against external threats; strengthens bilateral trust; deepens Fiji-Australian ties ensuring sustained investment; and elevates Fiji's role, which means enhancing Fiji's standing as a regional leader in law enforcement. That basically is what this Vuvale partnership impacts the way the Police will do it in modernising our journey ahead.

To answer your question, Deputy Chairperson, in terms of fuel, we have our plans in place. We are happy with what the Government has given us in the budget because we now have assistance through this Vuvale Treaty, which will lessen the burden on the FPF, and we will be able to address the issues that is emanating from our criminal and security environment.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you. I totally agree that the Committee has always heard you and the Force's presentation in terms of what is required. We fully support you. However, it comes down to the Government's budget. Currently, we have a $1.4 billion gross deficit budget for this financial year, and how funds are prioritised is very critical. We are glad for this Treaty but then the job of the Committee is to scrutinise and identify loopholes that can be strengthened for the future.

In terms of FPF, you said that partnership exists and now this is just a formalisation. What is really changing about the FPF to pull up its socks in terms of greater credibility, institutional integrity, accountability and transparency?

MR. A. LUTUNAUGA.- Under the Commissioner of Police's new direction, the organisation is being transformed through the Uplift Programme and the six pillars I mentioned. These reforms respond to the findings of Mike Bush's comprehensive assessment of the FPF, which led to the Programme's establishment.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- The integration of border management database on Article 3(7), you will notice that it commits the party to deepen people linkage by strengthening border management system. Will the Ministry be required to deploy biometric scanning border monitoring database system or visa tracking software integrated directly with Australia border control, and what would be the implication for Fiji's data sovereignty for its people?

MR. B. DAVETA.- Yes, integration is key to a way forward in Fiji because it streamlines expenses, bringing together information, especially, for security and crime. I have mentioned about the transnational serious organised crime efforts that we are doing in Fiji. Cabinet has approved for the establishment of the Joint Enforcement Centre, which will bring together intelligence from the Police, the Military, Customs, all the law enforcement agencies, and the community, which is being set up at the moment. The Commissioner of Police is the Chair of that Committee that looks after the Joint Enforcement Centre.

In terms of digitalising at the border, the Australians are working with the Immigration Department to improve border screening. They are moving into digitalising the entry and control at international airports.

The FRCS is also working on improving the border digital systems with Ports Authority and MSAF. They are all looking at that. The US is very supportive of port security because we need to comply with International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS), which is an international requirement for all ports to upgrade security at the border. There is a lot of ongoing work in trying to digitalise and improve the border security systems.

We are also intending to work with other partners for support, for example, the Israelis are here and they are very good at that kind of security at the border. Perhaps, we can also ask for their assistance in looking at whatever systems that the Australians are going to put in place for any other upgrade or improvements that they can recommend that we can implement with the Immigration Department. Yes, there are improvements going on at the border. Perhaps, biometrics will also be considered for that.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- I understand that this Vuvale Union and the Veitacini Treaty is mooted by Government and the transition period is 12 months. How ready is your Ministry in that transition if there happens to be a change in government?

MR. B. DAVETA.- In terms of change in Government, I think, on the working level, with the programmes that are put in place, we will pursue that. However, it will be on whatever the government is going to decide about the Vuvale Union, and whether it is going to be taken out or kept or reformed in some way, we will have to align and comply.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- With infrastructure development, planning and organising, big infrastructure in terms of building, software, hardware and people training, there would be a lot of investment into that. It is just a thought, when you mentioned about resource sharing and the implementation of border security checks. We heard about the use of retinal screening at our border, these are all big investments, and the duty of the Committee is to ensure that Ministries and Departments are ready for the transition.

MR. B. DAVETA.- Yes, this Treaty has just been signed, and we are heading into the next decade in trying to have this capability in place. It also goes with evolving our own various workplaces, especially for digitalisation communications portfolio of Ministries. We are very mindful of the people and the extent of skills that will be needed for this. That is why I have raised about the tech workforce to be building up to that.

At the moment, the turnaround of staff in the Ministry of Communications is very high in terms of skills - going abroad or going to FNPF or FRCS, leaving the Civil Service. Yes, we are working with the initial Civil Service to try and retain skilled staff within and build up the workforce.

I think it is very important for us. We have been talking to Universities, all training institutions, as well as stakeholders, discussing this workforce to enable us to have the skills and the organisational structure that can take the pressure in terms of evolving us into the digital target that we are moving towards.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- I wish to sincerely thank the representatives of the Ministry of Policing and Communications for availing themselves for this submission. We appreciate your time and cooperation and look forward to a continued engagement should the Committee require any further information.

On that note, I declare this meeting closed.

The Committee adjourned at 11.13 a.m.

Ministry of Immigration

MINISTRY OF IMMIGRATION

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

PUBLIC SUBMISSION
FIJI – AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION AND OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE (VEITACIINI TREATY)

Friday, 4th September, 2026 | 2.15pm – 3.))pm | Small Committee Room, Parliament Complex, Government Buildings, Suva

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Opening Remarks

Madam Honourable Chair and Honourable Members of the Standing Committee,

On behalf of the Ministry of Immigration, I wish to sincerely thank Madam Chair and the Honourable Members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence for the opportunity afforded to the Ministry to appear before the Committee and share our perspectives on the **Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Veitacini Treaty**, particularly from the perspective of Fiji's immigration, border management and national security responsibilities.

The Ministry commends the foresight and vision of our national leaders, particularly the Honourable Prime Minister and respective Ministers, in elevating the longstanding Fiji–Australia relationship that was solidified in the TREATY as a shared commitment to protecting sovereignty, securing mutual defence and security interests, and contributing to the stability and security of the Pacific.

The Ministry recognises the longstanding and close relationship between Fiji and Australia and the important role that the **Vuvale Partnership** has played in strengthening cooperation between our two countries. Over the years, this partnership has translated into practical and tangible support to the Ministry, including capacity development of Immigration Officers, specialised technical and

operational training, the five-week Immigration Induction Training Pilot, support towards the MERIT immigration border-management system, provision of document forensic equipment and technical capability, and support towards the implementation of API/PNR through SITA. These initiatives have provided the Ministry with access to specialised expertise, technology, systems, equipment and training that are not readily available locally, and have contributed significantly to strengthening our institutional and operational capability.

The birth of the Vuvale Union represents a further significant deepening and strengthening of this engagement. It provides a more enduring and strategic framework through which Fiji and Australia can build on the strong foundation already established under the Vuvale Partnership. For the Ministry of Immigration, this is particularly important because our mandate places us at the frontline of protecting and managing Fiji's borders. As custodians of the border, the Ministry has a critical responsibility to ensure that Fiji remains open and accessible for legitimate travel, tourism, trade, investment, education and labour mobility, while at the same time maintaining the integrity, security and sovereignty of our borders.

The security of Fiji's borders is therefore a strategic priority for the Ministry. The border environment is increasingly complex, with emerging risks associated with transnational crime, identity and document fraud, irregular migration, people smuggling, trafficking, cyber-enabled activities and the movement of persons of interest. These risks require us to continuously strengthen our systems, intelligence and information capabilities, workforce, technology and operational readiness. **A secure border is not only an immigration responsibility; it is an important component of Fiji's national security, economic security and social stability.**

In this regard, the Vuvale Union provides an important opportunity for the Ministry to move beyond individual projects and initiatives and towards **deeper, more integrated and sustainable cooperation** with Australia. This includes strengthening integrated border management, risk assessment and profiling, identity and document security, information and intelligence sharing, digital

transformation, transnational crime prevention, workforce capability and professional development. It also provides an opportunity to further strengthen the capacity of our Immigration Officers through access to specialised Australian expertise, systems, training and operational practices.

At the same time, the Ministry recognises that **border security and legitimate mobility must advance together**. Fiji must be able to facilitate the lawful and orderly movement of people while maintaining robust measures to identify and manage risks at the border. The objective is therefore not simply to make the border more restrictive, but to make it **smarter, more secure, more efficient and more responsive to emerging risks**, while facilitating legitimate movement and supporting Fiji's economic and development priorities.

The Ministry also acknowledges that deeper cooperation and increased responsibilities must be supported by adequate institutional capacity and sustainable resources. The implementation of initiatives such as MERIT Border Management System (BMS), API/PNR, document security and other border-management technologies will require appropriate staffing, specialised skills, ICT infrastructure, cybersecurity, maintenance and continued professional development. Strengthening the Ministry's organisational capacity will therefore be essential to ensure that Fiji can fully realise the benefits of the Vuvale Union and sustain the capabilities developed through the partnership.

Against this background, the Ministry views the **Vuvale Union not as the beginning of a new relationship, but as an opportunity to build upon and deepen an already productive and practical partnership**. The assistance and cooperation Fiji has received from Australia have laid an important foundation for modernising our immigration and border-management capabilities. The Ministry now looks forward to working with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade, relevant Government agencies and our Australian counterparts to further translate the commitments under the Vuvale Union into practical, sustainable and mutually beneficial outcomes.

Ultimately, the Ministry's priority is clear: **to protect the integrity and security of Fiji's borders while facilitating legitimate movement and supporting Fiji's national interests**. The Vuvale Union provides a valuable strategic platform to advance this objective through stronger partnership, greater capability, innovation, technology, information sharing and sustained institutional development.

Madam Chair and Honourable Members, the Ministry is appreciative of the support received from Australia to date and welcomes the opportunity to further strengthen this important partnership for the security, prosperity and wellbeing of Fiji and our people.

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MINISTRY OF IMMIGRATION

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

Public Submission

Friday, 4th September 2026 | 2.15 pm – 3.00 pm | Small Committee Room, Parliament Complex, Suva

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WRITTEN RESPONSES

a) The Ministry's role and involvement in the development and proposed implementation of the Treaties

The Ministry commends the foresight and vision of our national leaders, particularly the Honourable Prime Minister and respective Ministers, in elevating the longstanding Fiji–Australia relationship to the level of the **Veitacini Treaty,** reflecting a shared commitment to protecting sovereignty, securing mutual defence and security interests, and contributing to the stability and security of the Pacific.

Within this broader whole-of-Government framework, the Ministry of Immigration has contributed to the consideration and development of the Fiji–Australia **Vuvale Union** and the broader Fiji–Australia security relationship, particularly in areas falling within its mandate. These include immigration, border management, people mobility, identity management, migration governance and border security**.**

As the Ministry responsible for border management and security, while also facilitating the legitimate and orderly movement of people through various migration pathways, the Ministry has provided relevant policy and strategic advice during the development of the Treaty.

The Ministry's role is therefore closely aligned with the Treaty's objectives of strengthening prosperity, resilience and security, recognising that effective migration management and secure borders are fundamental to national security, economic development and regional stability. The Treaty provides an opportunity to further strengthen cooperation in areas such as people mobility, secure and

efficient border management, information and intelligence cooperation, identity and document integrity, capacity development and integrated border protection**.**

Ultimately, the Ministry's contribution to the Vuvale Union and the Veitacini Treaty is centred on ensuring that Fiji maintains secure, resilient and well-managed borders, while facilitating legitimate mobility and supporting economic opportunity**.** Through strengthened cooperation, information sharing, capacity development and integrated border management, the Ministry will contribute to the broader national objective of protecting Fiji's sovereignty and strengthening the security, stability and resilience of Fiji and the Pacific region.

b) Key provisions of the Vuvale Union and/or Veitacini Treaty that relate directly to the Ministry

The Ministry of Immigration is guided by Fiji's immigration laws and regulations, which provide the legislative framework for the administration, delivery, and enforcement of immigration services. As the custodian of border passenger clearing and border-management functions, the Ministry is responsible for managing the *identity, admissibility and intent of travelers seeking to enter, remain in or depart from Fiji*. Its mandate is therefore closely linked to *national security, border protection, migration management and the facilitation of legitimate mobility*.

Within this context, the **Vuvale Union and the Veitacini Treaty** are directly relevant to the Ministry, as their areas of cooperation intersect with the Ministry's statutory responsibilities and Fiji's broader national security and migration-management objectives.

Vuvale Union

The **Vuvale Union** provides a broad framework for strengthening Fiji–Australia cooperation across economic, development, mobility and security priorities. Several of its proposed areas of focus fall directly within, or support, the mandate of the Ministry, including *tackling transnational crime, strengthening border protection, enhancing circular migration, boosting economic growth and security, and advancing regional cooperation*.

The fundamental principle reflected in **Article 1(1)(c)** of the Vuvale Union, relating to the commitment *"to protect and promote … sovereignty,"* is particularly important to the Ministry. Immigration decisions are fundamentally rooted in the sovereign right of a nation to control its borders and regulate who may enter, remain in or depart from its territory. Accordingly, enhanced mobility and closer cooperation must be supported by effective border-management arrangements that safeguard Fiji's sovereignty, national interests and security.

Of particular relevance to the **Written Analysis paragraph 4.5(c) of the Vuvale Union Statement of Impact** which recognises the importance of *enhancing circular migration* and the relationship between stronger border

security and opportunities for enhanced visa settings, skills and education cooperation. This directly aligns with the Ministry's responsibility to facilitate safe, orderly and legitimate mobility while maintaining appropriate immigration controls, screening, compliance and risk-management measures.

The key areas of relevance to the Ministry include:

- **Migration and mobility:** Facilitating *safe, orderly and legitimate movement of people*, including opportunities for circular labour mobility and cooperation in skills and education, while maintaining appropriate immigration controls.
- **Border security and protection:** Strengthening border-management systems and integrated border protection to address *transnational crime, irregular movement and other cross-border risks*.
- **Information and intelligence cooperation:** Enhancing information and intelligence sharing to support *traveller screening, risk assessment and informed border-management decisions*.
- **Identity and document security:** Strengthening identity management, travel-document integrity and document forensic capability to detect *fraudulent, altered or compromised travel and identity documents*.
- **Digital transformation:** Supporting secure and modern immigration and border-management systems, including the Ministry's *Document Management System (DMS) for permits and visas, Citizenship Online System* and other technologies that improve the efficiency, integrity and security of immigration services.
- **Institutional and technical capability:** Strengthening institutional capability through *training, technical assistance, knowledge sharing and professional development*, including cooperation with Australian counterparts.
- **Legislative and regulatory reform:** Supporting the modernisation of Fiji's immigration legislative and regulatory framework, including *Australian assistance towards the cost of consultancy support for amendments to the Immigration Regulations*.

These areas are closely aligned with the Ministry's responsibilities for *border control, immigration compliance, travel-document integrity, identity management, migration management and the facilitation of legitimate mobility*. They also support the Ministry's broader agenda to modernise immigration services, strengthen border-management processes and enhance institutional capability.

The proposed cooperation under **Article 4(4)(c) and (e)**, relating to *transnational crime, integrated policing and border protection*, and **Article 5(1)(c) and (e)**, relating to *multidimensional threats, cooperation and broader regional development and security*, further reinforces the relevance of the Vuvale Union to the Ministry's mandate.

Veitacini Treaty

The **Veitacini Treaty**, while primarily focused on mutual security and defence cooperation, is also relevant to the Ministry through Fiji's broader national security and border-management architecture.

In particular, **Article 3(3)(a), (5) and (7)** contain areas of cooperation that directly intersect with the Ministry's responsibilities for *immigration, border security and migration management*. These provisions provide a basis for strengthening cooperation and coordination in areas where effective immigration and border-management capabilities contribute to Fiji's wider national security objectives.

Similarly, **Article 5 on Pacific Regionalism, particularly paragraph 1(c)**, is relevant to the Ministry's role in addressing *multidimensional threats* and contributing to efforts to safeguard peace and security in the Pacific. The Ministry's implementation of the **Advance Passenger Information and Passenger Name Record (API/PNR) System** provides a practical example of this approach, strengthening Fiji's capacity to receive and analyse passenger information prior to arrival and supporting *risk assessment, traveller screening and informed border-management decisions*.

Further, **Written Analysis paragraph 7.5 of the Security Pillar of the Statement of Impact** identifies *border security and migration-management reforms* as areas where Fiji and Australia can strengthen the sharing of practices, expertise and experience. This provides an important platform for enhanced technical and policy cooperation, including stronger political-level engagement through proposed *Immigration Ministers' dialogue* and opportunities to draw on relevant international and regional practices.

For the Ministry, this cooperation creates opportunities to strengthen *policy dialogue, technical cooperation, information sharing, border-management practices, immigration compliance, identity and document security, capacity development and institutional capability*, while contributing to Fiji's broader national and regional security objectives.

Overall Relevance to the Ministry

Taken together, the **Vuvale Union and the Veitacini Treaty** provide complementary frameworks for advancing Fiji's national interests. The Vuvale Union provides a broader platform for *economic, mobility, development and security cooperation*, while the Veitacini Treaty strengthens the *strategic security and defence dimension* of the Fiji–Australia relationship.

For the Ministry of Immigration, the key consideration is to ensure that these areas of cooperation reinforce one another—facilitating *legitimate and beneficial mobility* while maintaining *strong border security, effective migration management and protection of Fiji's sovereignty*.

The Treaties therefore present an opportunity to further strengthen Fiji's immigration and border-management architecture through *enhanced cooperation, information sharing, technology, capacity development and institutional and regulatory reform*, while ensuring that all measures remain consistent with Fiji's laws, national security interests and sovereign responsibility to manage its borders.

c) Existing and proposed areas of Fiji-Australia cooperation within the Ministry's portfolio

Fiji and Australia have established a strong and practical partnership in areas directly relevant to the Ministry's portfolio, particularly in *border security, immigration and border-management capability development, technical assistance, digital transformation, identity and document security, information sharing and professional development*.

Over the years, the Ministry has maintained a constructive and working relationship with its Australian counterparts, including the **Australian Department of Home Affairs and the Australian Border Force**. This cooperation has provided opportunities for the Ministry to strengthen its institutional, operational and technical capabilities, while benefiting from Australian expertise, systems and operational experience.

Existing cooperation has already translated into a number of tangible initiatives, including:

(i) Capacity Development of Immigration Officers

Specialised immigration, border-management and technical training has strengthened the capability of Immigration Officers through exposure to Australian systems, operational practices and technical expertise that are *not currently available through local training arrangements*. This cooperation has also supported professional development and the transfer of knowledge and operational practices to our Immigration Officers.

(ii) Immigration Induction Training, 5-week (Pilot)

The 5-week Immigration Induction Training, a pilot program, provided structured induction and practical training for newly recruited Immigration Officers. The programme contributes to establishing a *consistent professional foundation, strengthening operational readiness and building a more capable immigration workforce*.

(iii) Specialised Immigration Technical Training

Other specialised training and professional development opportunities have provided exposure to areas including *border control, immigration compliance, document examination, identity management, investigation and other specialised immigration functions*. These programmes are particularly important in

strengthening the Ministry's capacity to respond to evolving and increasingly sophisticated forms of transnational crime.

(iv) MERIT System (Integrated Border Management System (IBMS))
Australia has also supported the development of the **MERIT system**, which is intended to strengthen Fiji's immigration and border-management capability through the *modernised management, assessment and use of immigration and border information*.

(iv) Document Forensic Capability
The provision of *document forensic equipment, technical assistance and associated training* has strengthened Fiji's capacity to identify fraudulent, altered or otherwise compromised travel and identity documents. This capability contributes directly to *border integrity, identity assurance and the prevention of immigration-related fraud*.

(vi) Advance Passenger Information/Passenger Name Record (API/PNR)
Support towards the implementation of API/PNR capability, including Fiji's engagement with SITA, is another significant area of cooperation. The system will strengthen *pre-arrival passenger assessment, traveler screening, risk analysis and informed border-management decision-making*.

These initiatives demonstrate that Fiji–Australia cooperation is already translating into *practical institutional strengthening, technology transfer, technical assistance, professional development and workforce capability*. They also provide a strong foundation for further cooperation under the Vuvale Union and Veitacini Treaty.

Proposed and Emerging Areas of Cooperation

The Ministry sees the Vuvale Union as an opportunity to consolidate existing cooperation and expand collaboration into areas of strategic and operational importance. Ongoing discussions with Australian counterparts have identified a number of areas where cooperation could be further strengthened, particularly in *border automation and digitisation, specialised border capabilities, information sharing, immigration compliance and the detection and investigation of transnational crime*.

The Ministry is undergoing significant *structural and organisational reform* as it transitions towards a more sustainable, self-funding and statutory institutional model. These reforms are supported by recent legislative amendments, including the **Immigration (Amendment) Act 2026**, which provides an important foundation for strengthening the Ministry's governance, operational capability and future institutional arrangements.

This reform agenda provides an opportunity to further align Fiji–Australia cooperation with the Ministry's evolving mandate and strategic priorities. Future cooperation can therefore be directed towards *institutional strengthening,*

legislative and regulatory modernisation, digital transformation, workforce development and enhanced border-security capability.

Overall, the Ministry considers that the existing Fiji–Australia partnership provides a strong foundation for deeper cooperation under the **Vuvale Union and Veitacini Treaty**. The priority will be to build on established programmes and relationships and focus future cooperation on areas that deliver *practical and sustainable capability, strengthen Fiji's border security and immigration systems, enhance legitimate mobility, and support the Ministry's broader institutional and legislative reform agenda*.

d) Ministry's responsibilities under the proposed 10-Year Work Plan

The Ministry's specific responsibilities under the proposed 10-Year Work Plan will be determined through the *whole-of-Government implementation process* and agreed priorities between Fiji and Australia. Within this framework, the Ministry's core focus will be to strengthen Fiji's border security, migration management, workforce capability and intelligence-led border-management systems**,** while facilitating legitimate movement of people.

A key area of focus will be the continued modernisation of Fiji's border-management capability. The MERIT system will be a central component of this reform and, with Australian support, is intended to progressively replace the existing IBMS with a more integrated and intelligence-informed platform for managing immigration and border information. The project is progressing well, with Fiji Immigration working closely with the Australian project team and relevant border agencies. The Australian project team will also be in Fiji next week for consultations with key border agencies to identify operational, information-sharing and interoperability requirements and to support a coordinated *whole-of-Government approach*.

Building on this foundation, the Ministry's longer-term priorities will include digitisation and automation of border processes, enhanced identity and traveller checks, improved use of passenger and travel information, strengthened document examination and detection capabilities, and expanded information and intelligence sharing**.** These measures will support the implementation and integration of initiatives such as *API/PNR, identity management and automated traveller screening*, consistent with the broader Vuvale Union commitment to strengthening border management and mobility.

Equally important will be staffing and organisational reform to strengthen frontline border capability**.** A key priority is the return of the Primary Line Officer (PLO) function to the Ministry**,** recognising the critical role of frontline Immigration officers in primary passenger assessment, risk identification, immigration decision-making and border enforcement. Bringing this function back within the Ministry will strengthen accountability, operational coordination

and alignment with the Ministry's mandate, while ensuring that frontline officers are appropriately trained, equipped and supported.

A further priority will be strengthening the Ministry's role as the ***First Line of National Security*** through intelligence-led border management and early identification of potential threats**.** This includes strengthening an *Immigration-led Intelligence Centre* to support risk assessment, information analysis and coordinated intelligence sharing, including the identification of trafficking, document fraud, irregular migration and other transnational criminal activities before such threats materialise domestically.

Collectively, these reforms will enhance the Ministry's ability to identify behavioural indicators, inconsistencies in travel histories, fraudulent documentation and suspicious migration patterns**,** enabling earlier intervention and more effective border-security responses.

The implementation of these priorities will require corresponding investment in infrastructure, technology, specialised equipment, training and workforce capability**,** supported through appropriate national resourcing and Fiji–Australia technical cooperation.

Overall, the Ministry's objective under the proposed 10-Year Work Plan is to establish a resilient, intelligence-led, technologically enabled and professionally staffed border-management capability**.** This will strengthen national security and border integrity while continuing to facilitate legitimate travel, migration, people-to-people links and economic mobility.

e) Anticipated benefits and opportunities for Fiji

The Ministry anticipates significant benefits from the Treaties through the continuation and expansion of practical Fiji–Australia cooperation, particularly in strengthening immigration workforce capability, border security, technology, intelligence and institutional resilience**.**

A key benefit is the strengthening of Fiji's Immigration workforce and institutional capability**.** Australian-supported training and professional exchanges provide Immigration officers with specialised knowledge, technical skills and practical exposure to immigration and border-management systems and practices that are not readily available locally. The five-week *Immigration Induction Training Pilot*, together with specialised training in *travel document examination, risk assessment and profiling, behavioural techniques, interviewing, fraudulent document examination* and work attachments, provides an important foundation for developing a professional and capable Immigration workforce.

The Treaties also provide opportunities to strengthen Fiji's technological and operational capabilities through initiatives such as:

- the MERIT immigration border-management system**.**

- API/PNR capability for enhanced pre-arrival passenger assessment.
- document forensic equipment and technical expertise**.**
- strengthened identity and document management**.**
- enhanced information and intelligence sharing**.**
- continued specialised training and professional exchanges; and
- greater access to Australian expertise in *digital transformation, border management, compliance, intelligence and identity management*.

Collectively, these initiatives will support the development of a modern, professional, intelligence-led and technology-enabled immigration and border-management system**,** while continuing to facilitate legitimate movement of people.

This capability is increasingly important given the evolving nature of transnational organised crime in the Pacific. Fiji's strategic location and connectivity can expose the country to emerging risks, including trafficking, illicit migration, document fraud and other forms of cross-border criminal activity. In this environment, Immigration has a critical role as the ***First Line of National Security***, with the ability to identify and assess potential threats before they become established within Fiji.

Strengthening advance identification and intelligence-led assessment will enable Immigration officers to better assess *travel patterns, declared activities, commercial relationships, financial capability, documentation and other relevant intelligence* to determine whether a traveller's circumstances are consistent with their declared purpose.

The anticipated benefit is therefore not limited to improved border processing. It is about developing an **early-warning and preventive capability** that enables Immigration to identify behavioural indicators, inconsistencies in travel histories, fraudulent documentation and suspicious migration patterns, supporting timely intervention and disrupting potential criminal activity before it takes root domestically.

Achieving this will require an **Immigration-led, whole-of-government intelligence approach**, bringing together Immigration, Customs, Police, Maritime Security, Financial Intelligence and regional partners. Such cooperation will strengthen information sharing, coordinated risk assessment and joint responses, thereby safeguarding Fiji's *sovereignty, border integrity and national security*.

Ultimately, the Fiji–Australia partnership provides an opportunity to build **stronger people, stronger systems and stronger borders**, positioning Fiji Immigration to respond effectively to evolving migration and border security threats while supporting safe, secure and legitimate mobility.

f) Legislative, Policy, Regulatory, Institutional or Administrative Requirements

The Ministry has already taken significant steps to strengthen the legislative framework governing immigration and border management. The Immigration Act was passed by Parliament on 28 May 2026**,** with the amendments capturing key requirements to support the modernisation of the Ministry's border-management capability, including the Integrated Border Management System (IBMS) transition and API/PNR capability, etc.

The Ministry is currently progressing the review and amendment of the Immigration Regulations**,** with funding assistance from Australia under the *Vuvale Union*. This work is intended to ensure that the regulatory framework remains aligned with the amended legislation and is responsive to emerging requirements in *digital border management, information sharing, traveller screening, risk assessment and border security*.

The ongoing regulatory reforms will provide an important legal and policy foundation for the implementation of **MERIT, API/PNR and other digital border-management initiatives**, while supporting enhanced information and intelligence sharing and stronger inter-agency cooperation.

Going forward, implementation of the proposed 10-Year Work Plan may require further policy, institutional and administrative measures, including updated *SOPs, data-sharing arrangements, operational protocols, governance mechanisms, technical standards, infrastructure and workforce capability*.

These reforms will ensure that the Ministry has the necessary legislative, regulatory and institutional framework to progressively strengthen its role as the *First Line of National Security*, while facilitating safe, secure and legitimate movement of people.

g) Financial, staffing, infrastructure, capacity building and other resource implications

The implementation of the proposed 10-Year Work Plan will have financial, staffing, infrastructure, technology and capacity-building implications for the Ministry. These requirements will be assessed progressively in line with agreed priorities, available resources and the respective contributions of Fiji and Australia.

Key resource requirements will include investment in modern border-management technology and supporting infrastructure**,** including the implementation and sustainability of *MERIT, API/PNR, digital border processes, identity management and information-sharing capabilities*.

There will also be a continued need to strengthen staffing levels, specialised skills and professional capabilities within Immigration to support intelligence-led

border management, risk assessment, document examination, compliance, enforcement and emerging border-security functions.

Capacity building will remain a critical component of the partnership, including *specialised training, technical assistance, work attachments, professional exchanges and access to Australian expertise*. This will ensure that the Ministry has the necessary human capability to effectively utilise new systems and respond to evolving migration and border-security risks.

In addition, appropriate resources will be required for maintenance, sustainability and continuous enhancement of systems, equipment and infrastructure**,** including ongoing technical support and workforce development.

The Ministry will therefore work closely with relevant Government agencies and Australian counterparts to identify and prioritise resource requirements, with opportunities for technical assistance, capability development and targeted Australian support pursued under the *Vuvale Union*.

Overall, the resource implications should be viewed as a long-term investment in Fiji's national security, border resilience and institutional capability**,** while ensuring that investments are sustainable and aligned with Fiji's national priorities.

h) Key issues, risks and challenges

The implementation of the proposed 10-Year Work Plan will need to take into account a number of strategic, operational, technological, institutional and resource-related challenges**.** These will require continued coordination between Fiji and Australia and a phased, sustainable approach to implementation.

A key challenge will be ensuring that new border-management technologies and systems are effectively integrated with existing Government systems and that the necessary infrastructure, connectivity, technical support and resources are available to sustain them over the long term.

The increasing reliance on information and intelligence sharing will also require appropriate governance, data protection, interoperability and information-security arrangements to ensure that information is shared securely, lawfully and in a timely manner across relevant border and security agencies.

Another significant challenge is workforce capacity and capability**.** As border threats become more sophisticated, Immigration will require appropriately trained personnel with specialised skills in *risk assessment, intelligence, document examination, profiling, compliance, investigation and digital border management*. Sustaining these capabilities will require continuous training, professional development and succession planning.

The Ministry must also ensure that legislative, policy and regulatory frameworks keep pace with technological and operational developments**,** including the

implementation of MERIT, API/PNR and enhanced information-sharing arrangements.

Fiji's geographic location and increasing regional connectivity also expose the country to evolving transnational organised crime, trafficking, fraudulent documentation and other emerging border-security threats**.** These risks require an intelligence-led and preventive approach, supported by stronger inter-agency and regional cooperation.

There will also be financial and sustainability considerations**,** particularly in relation to the long-term maintenance, upgrading and replacement of technology, equipment and infrastructure. Implementation will therefore need to be prioritised according to national risk, available resources and agreed Fiji–Australia priorities.

Overall, the key challenge will be ensuring that modernisation is accompanied by the necessary legislative framework, institutional capability, skilled workforce, infrastructure, sustainable resources and effective inter-agency cooperation**.** Addressing these issues will be critical to achieving a resilient, intelligence-led and technology-enabled border-management system that strengthens Fiji's *national security and border integrity* while facilitating legitimate movement of people.

Overall Ministry Position

The Ministry supports the **Vuvale Union and the proposed 10-Year Work Plan**, recognising the opportunity to further strengthen Fiji's immigration and border-management capability through sustained Fiji–Australia cooperation.
The Ministry's position is that implementation should focus on **strengthening border security while facilitating legitimate movement of people**, supported by modern technology, intelligence-led approaches, information sharing and a highly capable Immigration workforce.

The Ministry has already commenced key reforms, including amendments to the *Immigration Act 2003*, incorporating provisions to support IBMS modernisation and API/PNR**,** and is currently progressing amendments to the *Immigration Regulations 2007* with Australian technical assistance under the *Vuvale Union*.

Going forward, the Ministry will prioritise the progressive development of MERIT, API/PNR, digital border processes, identity and document security, intelligence capability, specialised workforce development and stronger inter-agency cooperation**.** These initiatives will position Immigration as the ***First Line of National Security*** and strengthen Fiji's capacity to anticipate, identify and respond to evolving migration and transnational border-security threats.

Overall, the Ministry considers the Vuvale Union an important platform for long-term capability development, institutional strengthening and border

modernisation**,** while ensuring that cooperation remains aligned with Fiji's *sovereignty, national interests, security priorities and development objectives*.

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REFERENCE TO KEY PROVISIONS OF THE VUVALE UNION AND/OR TREATY

ARTICLE 1(1)(b–c)

COLLECTIVE SECURITY & SOVEREIGNTY



Collective security and protection of sovereignty.

ARTICLE 3(3)(a)

ECONOMIC GROWTH & SECURITY



Safe, orderly migration supporting prosperity.

ARTICLE 3(5)

DIGITIZATION



Secure digital immigration services and systems.

ARTICLE 3(7)

STRENGTHENING BORDER SYSTEM



Stronger management, identity verification and capability.

ARTICLE 4(4)(c)

TRANSNATIONAL CRIME



Cooperation, intelligence and coordinated enforcement.

ARTICLE 4(4)(e)

INTEGRATED BORDER PROTECTION

BIOSECURITY FIJI | REPUBLIC OF FIJI NAVY | FIJI POLICE | FIJI REVENUE & CUSTOMS (FRCS) | AUSTRALIAN BORDER FORCE

Integrated policing, defence and border protection.

ARTICLE 5(1)(c),(e)

MULTIDIMENSIONAL SECURITY



Technology-enabled response to multidimensional threats.

EXISTING COOPERATIONS



1. DOCUMENT EXAMINATION LAB
Passport security and document verification



2. CAPAPCITY BUILDING
Skills, knowledge and capability development



3. MERIT BORDER MANAGEMENT
Airport, wharf and border operations



4. DIGITIZATION OF IMMIGRATION SERVICES
Efficient digital service delivery



5. INFORMATION EXCHANGES
BORDER / ENFORCEMENT COORDINATION

KEY INITIATIVES

1. INFRASTRUCTURE AND RESOURCING
Building capacity and capability



- Modern facilities and technology
- Adequate resourcing and equipment
- Capacity building and professional development
- Officer wellbeing and safety
- Continuous improvement and innovation

2. FULL DIGITIZATION OF BORDER PROCESSES AND SERVICES



- Digital arrival and departure processes
- Paperless travel and immigration services
- eGates and self-service kiosks
- Integrated and secure data services

KEY INITIATIVES

3. IMMIGRATION INTELLIGENCE – LED TARGETING CENTRE



- Intelligence-led risk assessment
- Targeting high-risk individuals and cargo
- Data analytics and information sharing with partners

4. FULL OWNERSHIP OF BORDER



- Absorb Primary Line Officers into the organisation
- Clear roles, reporting lines and career pathways
- Adequate staffing, training, technology and equipment
- Consistent immigration control across all ports of entry

OUTCOME

A modern, independent and financially sustainable immigration organisation

1. DYNAMIC STATUTORY BODY



- Independent and accountable governance
- Modern facilities, technology and resources
- Professional and capable workforce
- Efficient, responsive immigration services

2. PATHWAY TO SELF-FUNDING



- Government revenue from immigration services
- Efficient and transparent revenue management
- Reinvestment in border security and modernization
- Reduced reliance on government funding

Ministry of Immigration

First Line of National Security



Proactive Detection & Risk Management

- API / PNR — Passenger & Flight Data
- ETA — Travel Authorization
- Transnational Crimes — Drugs · Human Trafficking · Illegal Migration · Terrorism
- Threat Assessment — Watchlists & Intelligence

Full Digitization of Borders

- eGates & Biometrics
- Digital Travel Card
- Online Applications
- Integrated Systems
- Real-time Data Sharing

Ministry of Immigration


Vinaka

[VERBATIM REPORT]

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

UNION/TREATY

(1) FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION
(2) OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE
(VEITACINI TREATY)

ENTITY: (1) Ministry of Immigration

VENUE: Big Committee Room (East Wing)

DATE: Friday, 4th September, 2026

VERBATIM REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE HELD AT THE COMMITTEE ROOM (EAST WING), PARLIAMENT PRECINCTS, GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, ON FRIDAY, 4TH SEPTEMBER, 2026, AT 9.12 A.M.

Present

Hon. R.R. Sharma	-	Deputy Chairperson
Hon. P.K. Ravunawa	-	Member
Hon. V. Lal	-	Member
Hon. Ratu J.B. Niudamu	-	Alternate Member

Apologies

Hon. L.S. Qereqeretabua	-	Chairperson
Hon T.R. Matasawalevu	-	Member
Hon. I. Tuiwailevu	-	Member

Interviewee/ Submittee: Ministry of Immigration In Attendance:

(1) Mr. Aliki Salusalu - Permanent Secretary
(2) Ms. Amelia Komaisavai - Director Immigration
(3) Ms. R. Rabukawaqa - Deputy Director Immigration
(4) Mr. Jese Cirikisuva - Manager, Compliance and Investigation
(5) Ms. Laisa Cili - Manager, Policy

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Honourable Members, Officials from the Ministry of Immigration, members of the media and the public, dear viewers, ladies and gentlemen; a very good morning to you all. It is my pleasure to welcome everyone present in this room, as well as those joining us via live broadcasts.

At the outset, for information purposes, I wish to advise that pursuant to the Standing Orders of Parliament, specifically Standing Order 111, all Committee meetings are open to the public and media. Accordingly, this submission meeting is open to the public and the members of the media.

However, should there be any sensitive information relating to this submission that cannot be disclosed publicly, such information may be provided to the Committee either in writing or in a closed session. This will only be permitted in limited circumstances, including the following: matters relating to national security, third-party confidential information, personnel or human resource matters and Committee deliberation and development of Committee's recommendation and reports.

I wish to remind honourable Members and Officials from the Ministry that all comments and questions should be directed through the Chair. For viewers following this meeting live on *Facebook*, questions may be submitted via the comments section. Please, note that only relevant questions will be considered by the Committee. Members of the Committee may interject during the submission or alternatively, questions will be raised at the conclusion of the presentation.

I remind all present that this is a parliamentary proceeding. All information provided is protected under the Parliamentary Powers and Privileges Act and Standing Orders of Parliament. Slander or libel of any kind will not be condoned and all information presented to the Committee should be factual.

In terms of meeting protocols, movement within the meeting should be kept to a minimum. The usage of mobile phones is discouraged, and all mobile phones must be placed on silent mode for the duration of the meeting.

I will now introduce the Members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence.

(Introduction of Members of the Standing Committee)

Today, the Committee will receive an in-person submission from the Ministry of Immigration in relation to the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance or Veitacini Treaty, that are currently before the Committee. I now invite the Officials from the Ministry of Immigration to introduce themselves and proceed with your submission. Kindly note that microphone should be turned on before you speak and turned off immediately after, to avoid any disruption to the live submission. Please, proceed, and you have 15 minutes for your presentation and then the floor will be opened for questions and answers.

(Introduction of Ministry of Immigration Officials)

MR. A.V. SALUSALU.- Deputy Chairperson, on behalf of the Ministry of Immigration, I wish to sincerely thank you and the honourable Members of the Standing Committee for the opportunity afforded to the Ministry to appear before the Committee and share our perspective on the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Veitacini Treaty, particularly from the perspective of Fiji's immigration, border management and national security responsibilities.

The Ministry commends the foresight and vision of our national leaders, particularly the honourable Prime Minister and respective honourable Ministers, in elevating the longstanding

FijiAustralia relationship that was solidified in a Treaty, signed this year around 6th July, as a shared commitment to protecting sovereignty, securing mutual defence and security interests, and contributing to the stability and security of the Pacific.

The Ministry recognises the longstanding and close relationship between Australia and Fiji, and the important role that the Vuvale Partnership has played in strengthening cooperation between our two countries. Over the years, this partnership has translated into practical and tangible support to the Ministry, including:

- Capacity development of Immigration Officers;
- specialised technical and operational training;
- five-week Immigration Induction Training Pilot as supported towards the Merit Immigration Border Management System;
- provision of document forensic equipment and technical capability; and
- support towards the implementation of API-PNR through SITA.

These initiatives have provided the Ministry with access to specialised expertise, technology, systems, equipment and training that are not readily available locally, and have contributed significantly to strengthening our institutional and operational capability.

The birth of the Vuvale Union represents a further significant deepening and strengthening of this engagement. It provides a more enduring and strategic framework through which Fiji and Australia can build on the strong foundation already established under the Vuvale Partnership. For the Ministry of Immigration, this is particularly important because our mandate places us at the frontline of protecting and managing Fiji's border.

As the custodian of our border passenger clearing, the Ministry has a critical responsibility to ensure that Fiji remains open and accessible for legitimate travel, tourism, trade, investment, education and labour mobility, while at the same time, maintaining the integrity, security and sovereignty of our borders.

The security of Fiji's borders is, therefore, a strategic priority for the Ministry. The border environment is increasingly complex, with emerging risks associated with transnational crime, identity and document fraud, irregular immigration, people smuggling, trafficking, cyber-enabled activities and the movement of persons of interest. These risks require us to continuously strengthen our system's intelligence and information capabilities.

A secure border is not only an immigration responsibility – it is an important component of Fiji's national security, economic stability and social coherence. In this regard, the Vuvale Union

provides an important opportunity for the Ministry to move beyond individual projects, initiatives, but towards a deeper and a more integrated and sustainable cooperation with Australia.

That includes the strengthening of our integrated border management system, risk assessment and profiling, identifier and verification of document, information and intelligence sharing, digital transformation, transnational crime prevention, and workforce and professional development. It also provides an opportunity to further strengthen the capability of our Immigration Officers through access to special Australian expertise and systems, training and operational best practices.

The Ministry also recognises that border security and legitimate mobility must advance together. Fiji must be able to facilitate the lawful and orderly movement of people while maintaining robust measures to identify and manage risks at the border. The objective is, therefore, not simply to make the border more restrictive, but to make it smarter, more secure, more efficient, and more responsive to emerging threats.

While facilitating legitimate movement and supporting Fiji's economic and development priorities, the Ministry acknowledges that deeper cooperation and increasing responsibility must be supported by adequate institutional capability and sustainable resources. Implementation of initiatives such as MERIT Border Management System, the API-PNR, document assessment and other border management technology will require appropriate staffing, specialised skills, ICT infrastructure, cybersecurity, maintenance and continued professional development within the Ministry. Strengthening the Ministry's organisational capacity will, therefore, be essential to ensure Fiji can fully realise the benefits of the Vuvale Union and sustain the capability developed through this partnership.

On that background, the Ministry views the Vuvale Union not only as the beginning of a new relationship, but as an opportunity to build upon an already productive and practical partnership. The assistance and cooperation Fiji has received from Australia have laid an important foundation for modernising our immigration and border management capabilities. The Ministry now looks forward to working with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade, other relevant Government agencies and Australia counterpart to further translate commitment under the Vuvale Union into practical and sustainable, as well as mutual beneficial outcomes.

Ultimately, the Ministry's priority is clear, to protect the integrity and security of Fiji's border while facilitating legitimate movement and supporting Fiji's national interest. The Vuvale Union provides a valuable strategic platform to advance these objectives through stronger partnership, greater capability, innovation, technology, information sharing, and sustained institutional development.

Mr. Chairman and honourable Members, the Ministry is appreciative of the support received from Australia to-date and welcomes the opportunity to further strengthen this important partnership for the security, prosperity and wellbeing of Fiji and our people.

If you allow, we can go through the presentation, Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, we have a few slides to show a bit of the initiatives on our part in relation to the questions that were raised from (a) to (h). We have a few slides to share with the honourable Members on what exactly Immigration is. It is not a direct benefit, but it is in cooperation, in terms of the Vuvale Union and also the Veitacini Treaty.

As a whole, we have the framework that is known as the Vuvale Partnership. We will give a bit of history on our development in the last one year, as well as when I joined the Ministry. We worked on the legislation. We saw that the legislation in place needed to be amended to accommodate the situation on the ground at the moment. So, from last year to 28th May this year, our law was enacted in Parliament and now, we are going through the regulations for the commencement of this law.

As you can see, honourable Members, we have the travel document, permit and visa, citizenship, border management, security and enforcement. These are part of our ministerial assignment that was given to the honourable Minister when he was sworn in on 10th January last year. These are the mandates that we are empowered to perform at the border. In this legislation, we have a few areas that are amended that will improve our service, and we are so thankful to the Government for allowing us to move across this milestone on the enactment of our law. I believe that with this improvement and amendment of our law, we will be able to address some of the issues that were raised in some of the earlier sessions regarding people leaving our shores that are a bit questionable in nature.

On our relationship with Australia based on the Vuvale Union, we were able to work through some of the major improvements in terms of our legislation and also some of the in-house capabilities in terms of the systems that we are going to use. Prior to the signing of the Treaty on 6th July, we had been working with the Australian Government on a few projects, and one of them is the MERIT System to replace the current IBMS, which is the Sri Lankan system.

We have a big issue with the system at the moment because of the time zone. The support, or after-sales support, in terms of supporting the system from far away, has been an issue. With the MERIT System, we are on the same time zone, and the support will be quite timely in terms of addressing issues at the border.

We can say that when we look through the Articles of the Treaty, we can relate to each Article.

Article 1 - Collective Security and Sovereignty: These are the relationships that support the work of Immigration on each of the Articles of the Vuvale Union. I was quite fortunate to be selected to be part of the consultation team that met with a counterpart from Australia on the design of this Treaty. We had about eight meetings and one of them was in Canberra, where we went through all the Articles to ensure that Immigration is addressed. It is a major issue in terms of addressing some of the key issues in the Pacific on transnational ground. We have a big ocean and we are so fortunate that we have a big ocean, but the policing of this big ocean becomes a challenge to our nation, especially, for law enforcement agencies where we have a big problem in terms of resources.

For economic growth and security, we have an article relating to immigration - Article 3(3)(a). For us, that is one big area that covers our work because we work with investors on investor permits and to also ensure that they are legitimate in terms of them investing in Fiji.

For digitalisation, we have Article 3(5) whereby it states, and I quote:

> "The Parties recognise that the transition to a digital economy requires safe and secure digital infrastructure and systems."

Article 3(7) relates directly to us, which states, and I quote:

> "The Parties commit to deepen people linkages by strengthening border management systems…"

So, we can say that in terms of the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union, the Ministry of Immigration have a lot of work under this workplan.

Due to time constraints, I think, from those slides, it is quite clear that we pick out all the sections that are relating to our work. For us to support the Union and the Treaty, it is very much embedded into all the Articles in the Treaty. Even for Article 5(1)(c) which states, and I quote:

> "Promoting Pacific-led peace and security initiatives and architecture to respond to multi-dimensional threats and strengthen and safeguard our shared Pacific values."

When we word the Treaty during our meetings and consultations, I have to make sure the wordings are correct for us in terms of our law. So, we now believe that the Treaty will really help the Ministry of Immigration in moving forward.

Some existing cooperation: At the moment, capacity development and Immigration Officers' training. Even before the Treaty was signed, we received a lot of assistance in terms of training of staff at the border for targeting and even profiling of our passengers through the Australian Border Force.

Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, I would just like to share with you that currently, we are going through the API-PNR System. That will be available to us from 2nd November this year, so we will then be able to assess passenger information even before boarding the plane. That is from their destination. So, we will receive that information for a period of seven hours to two hours before they even board the plane. That information is sent to us from (International Air Transport Association (IATA), through SITA. So, any person of interest that we have, for example, a red flag from any of the country, we will be able to request the airline, "Please, this person needs to be offloaded." In that way, we are moving our border outwards and also keep our country safe from people or others who have other agendas to come to Fiji.

At the moment, we have capacity building and development for Immigration Officers. For Immigration Induction Training, Australia has assisted us for the first ever five weeks induction training for immigration. This has never been done before, but through the Vuvale Partnership, we were able to run a five weeks' induction training for border and Immigration Officers, fully funded by Australia.

Sustainable Immigration Technical Training: We continue to receive training in terms of document forensics. At the border, we receive a lot of documents. We have to assess documents quite fast because the passengers will be standing there and the last thing is for us to hold the line. So, in the last few weeks, Australia has donated to us two assessment equipment, called document forensic equipment, operating in Nadi.

In the last four weeks, we have detected some fraudulent travel documents. So, we threw it under the microscope and there, we saw that it was attempted with, especially the cover page or the bio page, and has given us the confidence to say, "You will be refused entry because of the fraudulent document."

As I have mentioned before, the MERIT System that we have, we are going through projects now and we are hoping to go live before the end of the year. However, a request from the Australian

Government is that we have to go live in a period that is low, not on a busy period. So, we have moved it to January, whereby the MERIT System will go live, replacing the IBMS, which is the Sri Lankan system. We can see, at the moment, that we have got some capability from the training that we have done - the five weeks' induction training.

The MERIT Border Management System is currently happening now. We have been hearing a lot of digitization drives in Government. Immigration is trying to digitise travel at the border. At the moment, when you go to Nadi, we will have chaos. Chaos is already in place at the moment and the only remaining one is the immigration gate. With that one, we are hoping to install soon as well so that passengers, either departing or on arrival, will go through a seamless system or kind of trying to achieve a Singaporean kind of environment for travelers.

That is the digitisation of immigration services. For information exchange, we normally work with other border agencies in this area.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you, PS. Thank you for your presentation. I would like to close it off there. I will now open the floor for the Committee Members to ask questions.

HON. V. LAL.- Through you, Deputy Chairperson, thank you, PS, for your presentation. From your presentation, I can see throughout that you have stressed about the strengthening of our border management system to meet the Australian standards so to do that, there is a lot of work required in terms of our immigration software, biometric gates and passport verification. My question to you is; who is going to bear the cost of all these upgrades?

MR. A.V. SALUSALU.- Deputy Chairperson, the MERIT system is fully funded by the Australian Government.

We are currently going through project FISH1 at the moment. It was a visit to Australia around the month of June last year, where there was a commitment from the Australian Government that they are going to fund the new border management system for Fiji called MERIT.

HON. V. LAL.- Does that include training our people for this new programme?

MR. A.V. SALUSALU.- Honourable Member, the answer is 'yes', correct. We will go through the training or any required training for us to migrate from the current IBMS to the new

MERIT Border Management System. We are also doing workshops. Next week, we will have the MERIT Team together with SITA, for them to train our staff for the new border management system.

HON. V. LAL.- That means that once we accede to these Treaties, we will be on the same page with Australian standards.

MR. A. SALUSALU.- Correct, honourable Member.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Through you, Deputy Chairperson, I noticed the effort of trying to improve our digital system. Where will the software be sitting, locally or in Australia?

MR. A.V. SALUSALU.- Honourable Member, the software will be fully owned by Ministry of Immigration.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- My follow-up question on that, I noticed in Article 4(2)(b) on procurement and restriction border technologies. This requires the Parties to engage third parties in their critical infrastructure and technology and security sectors in a manner that protects and strengthens the Parties' – here, Australia and New Zealand. Will this restrict the Ministry of Immigration from contracting competitive non-western international technology providers to develop Fiji electronic passport, e-passport or border control database?

MR. A.V. SALUSALU.- Honourable Member, when it says a third party engaged by the Australian Government, the third party is the MERIT Team that develops the system. that is the third party that the Australian Government has engaged and that is why it is called the MERIT BMS system.

It does not stop us from the engagement of others, like we are doing at the moment for epassport where we have engaged Mühlbauer, a German company that has been producing our epassports at the moment. That is a different system from MERIT.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Thank you, PS. Through you, Deputy Chairperson, in other words, the procurement process will still follow the Fiji tender process if we have to, if the Ministry needs to procure items from offshore.

MR. A.V. SALUSALU.- Correct, honourable Member.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- So, Australia will not dictate to the Ministry the market or vendors that will provide whatever is required by the Ministry?

MR. A.V. SALUSALU.- Correct, honourable Member, it is only the development of the system that is fully funded. It does not limit the Ministry of Immigration from procurring any other services, like the passport.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Yes, my worry is the compatibility of the item that you will procure to be compatible with the Australian border that we are trying to aspire to. That is why that clause is very important so that Australia does not throw to us whatever we may need in the future.

MR. A.V. SALUSALU.- *Vinaka vakalevu*, honourable Member, I think the point is correctly mentioned - to make sure the integration part of it. Sometimes when we buy systems separately, the integration is the problem, especially the number of systems we use. At the moment, we use a DMS system, the passport system from Mühlbauer and the new MERIT but under the ICAO, for us to function properly at the border, we have to maintain or enforce two of the ICAO's Annexes – Annexes 9 and 17, that all our equipment and systems need to be ICAO certified, so the integration on these systems will allow smooth and seamless integration.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Now, with the transition into this e-passport and other things that you try to introduce through the Ministry of Immigration, for the people of Fiji who are currently holding a passport and were supposed to go through the e-gates, what will be the cost on the ordinary Fijians in this transition?

MR. A.V. SALUSALU.- At the moment, our passports have migrated from the old one since 2019, and we are now almost reaching that year. A lot of people are coming in, citizens are coming in and we encourage citizens to come and apply for the new passport which is e-passport, which will allow them the smooth transition at other airports. When they go across to Australia or New Zealand, up North, they can use the electronic system.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Will there be an added cost to their new passport with the improved system on it with the e-passport?

MR. A.V. SALUSALU.- There will be no additional cost.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- I would like to thank the PS Immigration and the Director for the presentation this morning, as we are trying to protect our borders. I would like to raise a question in terms of Article 3(7) - border management integration and technical sovereignty, which commits the parties to deepen people linkages by strengthening border management systems. Will that require Fiji to integrate its passport, visa and entry databases directly with Australian border tracking networks? If the answer is yes, how will Fiji protect its citizens' biometric data

sovereignty and privacy under such an integrated system, especially when we are talking about privacy and confidentiality of our travel documents and visas? Can we have an elaboration on that, PS?

MR. A.V. SALUSALU.- I will lead the answering of this question and will hand over to our technical team.

The system will be owned by the Fiji Government. Information sharing for us is not really that they are going to be looking into our system, they will build the system and hand it over to us. We will operate it within the premises of the Ministry of Immigration, and there will be no linkages in terms of information as part of the Privacy Act. That was one of the issues we raised with them, that there will be no backdoor to the system for anyone who can access the system without our knowledge. It will be a fully closed system given to us, and when they hand over the system to us, it will be fully owned by the Fiji Government.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Looking at the technological costs and integration, I know we are talking about really high-tech technology because looking at the complexity of transnational crimes, immigration has a greater role to play when you look at biosecurity and others. For example, you may strengthen your legislation and the way people get entry into Fiji, but do we still have the best scanning machines at our Nadi Airport? I believe they were donated. Is it one of the world's best scanning machines? Do we have to ensure that the legislation and the technology placed there are going hand-in-hand rather than you declared something that you do not have, you passed the immigration, but the scanners are still not some of the best that we have to be able to pick up whatever that should not be coming into the country?

MR. A.V. SALUSALU.- To respond to your question, Sir, we have two scanners at the airport, one is the scanner for passport, and the other one is a scanner for the arrival card. The primary line is with FRCS, at the moment, so those are Customs Officers. That was the delegated power from the Ministry of Immigration. Soon, we are going to revert to that role - the Ministry of Immigration, and I think there was a Cabinet decision made earlier in 2023 for the primary line to return back to the Ministry. So, at the moment, when we detect at the primary line some documents that are questionable, we refer them to the Immigration who sits behind the counter.

Now with the added capability of the document forensics, we throw it under the microscope and from there, we can detect a travel document, either a permit or a passport or any facilitation in the letter that actually arrives at the border, we are able to look deep into these documents if they are fraudulent.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- PS, recently, there was this alleged tax fraud suspect owing Fiji $23 million who left our shores. What gap will be strengthened between FRCS and Immigration, so that when we accede to this Treaty, we are up to par? Can you highlight on that?

MR. A.V. SALUSALU.- Deputy Chairperson, I am sure this was a big issue that was raised in either the media or the Government in addressing some of these problems. Straightaway after that incident, we had a meeting with the CEO FRCS and his Team, and we are putting together a mechanism to address what the lapses are.

At the moment, there was no reference on the Departure Prohibition Order (DPO). We will make sure that the referencing is clear and the timing. At the moment, with the Vuvale Partnership, the MERIT will give an option to FRCS and other border agencies that give us DPO for them to upload and remove from there. At the moment, all DPOs have been uploaded and removed by Immigration, but through the new system that is going to come in, it will enable law enforcement agencies at the border, FRCS and others, to upload their own and remove.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- PS, he has legally left Fiji and is anyone being held accountable for that $23 million?

MR. A.V. SALUSALU.- Mr. Chairman, the investigation is currently ongoing, and we are awaiting the outcome of that investigation.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Nadi Airport is out of space. What is your plan to incorporate all of these in just that small space that Nadi Airport has to offer? Will you see a lot of technologies coming in?

MR. A.V. SALUSALU.- Deputy Chairperson, the technology will actually save space. At the moment, when you enter that line to go into Immigration, you can see the big desks that the primary officers are sitting on, so when we are going to install all those gates, we are going to save most of that space.

When you travel overseas, the gates are quite compact gates that will actually save space, not using all the full desks when you depart from Nadi, or even upon arrival. So, we have worked with AFL and at the moment, they are currently showing us the space that all these gates will be installed. I think it is around seven. So we are going to install those gates using very minimal space on the side of even for arrival and departure.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- PS, in terms of maintenance, I know this is a 10-year programme or layout and $1.5 billion is injected into our economy but just for Immigration, when you look at all

of these technologies and software, who will be responsible for their maintenance during the 10-year period and beyond that? What is the plan? Is it going to go to a local company or an Australian company? What is the pathway?

MR. A.V. SALUSALU.- Deputy Chairperson, I may answer the first one. For the maintenance of the system, with MERIT, there are four phases. We are going through the first phase now, so until the fourth phase is fully delivered, the Australian Government will fully support it in terms of system support. After implementation, our staff will be fully trained to service our system.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- What we see in Fiji, and you will agree is that when our staff gets fully trained and specialised, there are always emails and doors being knocked on. How do you plan to retain these specialised people within our Immigration?

MR. A.V. SALUSALU.- Deputy Chairperson, I think we are not alone. The Government is always providing this training, especially in the technical and specialised areas. The Ministry of Immigration was part of the five Ministries that was supposed to go through a Job Evaluation Exercise (JEE), where we want to address issues on our staff retention.

At the moment, perhaps, the salaries are not high enough for our staff in terms of the skills they have, but we wish to be included in those five Ministries for us to go through evaluation to see the value of this training in terms of our staff. Others show interest, and as the capability increases, a lot of doors open for our staff, not only locally, but they are also moving across to other countries.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Just to make it clear, PS, with this agreement, these funds will not go to the salary of any local staff or salary increment?

MR. A.V. SALUSALU.- If you look at the workplan, I think the allocation is a big amount. As we are moving towards a self-funding model, we are targeting 2028 for us to become a selffunding model in terms of statutory authority. In that way, we will be able to address these issues on salaries, as well as maintain our staff.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- I totally welcome that, because there was a discussion that I had with a few Members of Parliament, I just cannot remember, because there are a lot of institutions and organisations dependent on Government funding. Some of these organisations have the resources and the ability to generate their own finance and make investments to support their operations.

HON. V. LAL.- Deputy Chairperson, Article 3(3)(c) and Article 3(7) talk about cultural and people linkages, including through mobility. My question to you, PS, is; does this guarantee reciprocal visa-free or visa-on-arrival entry for Fijian citizens entering Australia? I think this is in the interest of our people.

MR. A.V. SALUSALU.- During our consultation on the Treaty, Immigration raised to put forward a proposal for reciprocal visa. We got part of it, that they have increased it to four months for reciprocal. However, we have also requested that as part of the reciprocal and because it is a Treaty, it is a vuvale, we look after one another so that no one is left behind. If we can consider having that four months with a work permit on it or visa on arrival, but these are sovereign decisions for Australia. They have to decide from their end, but we provide Australia with visa on arrival. We requested for reciprocal visa conditions, and these are the decisions that the Australian Government will make from their end in terms of the visa.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- I have a quick question. When I was passing through Dubai, I guess, last year, I saw them pulling out some people and doing swab tests on their clothes and trying to detect for gunpowder or explosives. Do we have any sort of testing for Fiji along these lines?

MR. A. SALUSALU.- Perhaps, I will hand over to our technical team to respond to your question.

MR. J. CIRIKISUVA.- Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, in relation to the question in terms of our checks or verifications done on visitors at the border, this is something that has been currently considered by the Ministry, noting that we have just revised our legislation. Part of our legislation is to increase or enhance our enforcement efforts.

Through those enforcement efforts, it will empower Immigration Officers to conduct this necessary search at the border when required. This is an area that we need to coordinate, especially, with FRCS and other border agencies, noting the areas that confine us in terms of our laws - our jurisdiction. So, in those areas, that is where we really need to coordinate closely with our other agencies. For example, if there is a passenger and Immigration conducts a search and identifies that there is a drug or explosive, under our legislation, we will not be really empowered to take those explosives or those drugs. That is why we need FRCS or Police to come in where they are empowered by their respective legislation.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- So, the legislation part is in the amendment process? What is the update, is there a timeline, PS?

MR. J. CIRIKISUVA.- Sir, the principal Act has been passed in Parliament in May, so we are currently undergoing the formulation of the regulations.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Deputy Chairperson, through you, I have certain questions which I need you to answer, PS, particularly because I visit communities. My question is not related to these Treaties. First is the Bangladeshis who are coming in. I just need a confirmation from you as to the status of them coming in, and as we have seen a large number of Bangladeshis coming for work, can you update for the benefit of the public? Why are they here and what status are they in Fiji?

My second question is on the Nakasi and Rakiraki Offices, as I am from Ra and I have been informed in Parliament by your Minister that there will be an office set up in Rakiraki. What is the timeline for the new office in Rakiraki and also in Nakasi?

MR. A.V. SALUSALU.- I will respond to your second question, and I will give the Bangladeshi question to the Manager for Compliance and Investigation in terms of their status.

For the Offices in Nakasi and Rakiraki, as was highlighted in Parliament, we are going to be opening soon. Our plan at the moment is for the Nakasi Office to be opened towards the end of this month.

The honourable Minister left this morning, I think, on a trip to Tahiti and upon his return, we are planning to open the Nakasi Office. The week after, we are planning to open the Rairaki Office. So, last Saturday, we travelled down to Ragiraki, talked with the landlord and they are working on the building fitouts. I believe it is all done and we are looking forward to open these two Offices and it is a big milestone for the Fiji Government.

There is also a requirement to also look at opening an office in Nabouwalu and Sigatoka, so these are the two that are coming up, apart from Nakasi and Rakiraki.

MR. J. CIRIKISUVA.- Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, for the Bangladeshis, you asked the question as to why they are here, they are here to take on the roles or jobs that have been vacant, especially, during the period where the PALM Scheme was active. We saw an increase in recruitment by local companies in trying to replace our local workers who had participated in these PALM Scheme and other migration opportunity provided by other nations as well. For example, skilled worker pathway provided by New Zealand as well. So, the reason why

most employers are recruited Bangladeshis and also Indians is based on the fact that they offer cheap labour. That is something why most companies have employed these Bangladeshis.

Yes, there is quite a number of Bangladeshis in the country and most probably in social media, you might have seen that there are certain issues arising from these Bangladeshis. This is currently being looked at by not only Immigration but other Ministries as well, For example, Minister of Labour, the Fiji Police Force where is an informal taskforce that is currently on the ground, looking into the concerns or complaints raised by employers or by the Bangladeshis themselves.

At this moment, the human trafficking strategy and also the national action plan is currently being revised which we hope will formalise the taskforce to look into areas where complaints or trafficking concerns or complaints have been brought forth by this Bangladeshi.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Deputy Chairperson, through you, they are all here on work permits?

MR. J. CIRIKISUVA.- Yes, Sir.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- What about citizenship?

MR. J. CIRIKISUVA.- For those who are eligible for citizenship, they have applied for citizenship.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- I think the Act was revised and approved in Parliament. What is the new requirement there in order for one to become a citizen of Fiji? Can you elaborate on that because I think there is a difference now from the old Act to the new one which was passed by Parliament.

MR. A.V. SALUSALU.- Honourable Member, for the new law, I will ask my colleagues to also speak on that. The new law now has introduced permanent residency. So, in the 2003 Act, it gives allowance for anyone who comes into Fiji on work permit or any form of permit. As long as they are legally in Fiji for five years, they are eligible to apply for citizenship.

We saw a bit of issues on those areas. There was no buffer to be given a proper assessment for someone to become a citizen. Citizen is the highest honour a nation can give to anyone, and for us to have that five years qualification period, it does not give us a bit of area to assess applicants

properly before they become citizens. So, we have introduced permanent residency in the new law.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Through you, Deputy Chairperson, I have a question. In Article 11(1) of the Veitacini Treaty, arbitration of visiting forces and immigration breaches. The Article states that the dispute shall not be referred to any national or international tribunal or court, or any other that party for resolution. If visiting military personnel violate Fijian immigration laws or overstay their designated deployment terms, how will the Ministry resolve this dispute, if external jurisdiction does not allow?

MS. L. CILI.- Through you, Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, let me just talk about what we currently have in the Act. I believe the domestic law would come into play under that, in that it has to also be in alignment with the domestic law or what is governed by the

Immigration Act. So, what will be done is looking at that and also looking at our domestic law which governs how we work, that is where we will find and we can mitigate whatever result resolution that can be established.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Maybe, on the last line, "…shall not be referred to any national or international court." Perhaps, you can provide the answer later.

MR. A.V. SALUSALU.- Yes, we understand that for any treaty, and this is the first ever treaty between Fiji and Australia. We all know that a treaty is a legally binding document between the States, either bilateral or multilateral. I am sure the dispute here is condoned in that agreement, that it will be within the ambit of the Treaty.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Thank you, PS. Deputy Chairperson, through you, it is important because this Committee will need to submit our report on this Treaty back to Parliament at the end of this month, in the next sitting of Parliament, so we would expect a clear definition of this from your Ministry. Thank you.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Do you have a final few words to respond to that?

MS. A. KOMAISAVAI.- Honourable Members, I just want to raise a question on that clause that you have mentioned. There has been some precedent case of treaties been committed to by the Fiji Government and how was this resolved by the Fijian Government considering that there is some limitations of referring matters to the national and international tribunal, and the court is also mentioned there. So, what are some of the precedent cases for the Fiji Government in terms of this clause?

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Madam, that is where the PS of the Office of the Prime Minister and your ministry were consulted when Fiji and Australia made this Treaty, so we expect the answers from you.

MS. A. KOMAISAVAI.- Sorry, we are just asking what are the precedents of this in the Fiji Government?

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- No worries, Madam. If there is any information that the Committee requires, we will have it in writing. We understand this is new for Fiji. However, the Fiji Police Force does say it existed, but we are just formalising this. So, thank you, and I wish to sincerely thank you again for your Ministry in availing yourselves for this meeting. We appreciate your time and cooperation, and we look forward to your continued engagement should the Committee require any further information.

On that note, I declare this meeting closed.

The Committee meeting adjourned at 10.14 a.m.

Fiji Revenue and Customs Service

OPENING STATEMENT
FIJI REVENUE AND CUSTOMS SERVICE

Public Submission to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence
Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty)
Friday, 4 September 2026 | 10.10am – 11:10am | Big Committee Room 2

Honourable Chairperson, Honourable Deputy Chairperson, Honourable Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and for extending this invitation to the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service to make a public submission on the FijiAustralia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance, the Veitacini Treaty.

In the time available, I will focus my remarks on the provisions of the two Treaties that fall directly within FRCS's mandate as Fiji's revenue and border management agency and on what their implementation will mean for our operations, our people and the services we deliver to Government and to the people of Fiji.

FRCS's Role and Involvement

FRCS is the Government agency responsible for revenue collection and for border protection, trade and travel facilitation. As such, we sit at the intersection of both Treaties. The Vuvale Union speaks directly to prosperity, digital economy transition and border and mobility settings. The Veitacini Treaty speaks to cooperation on sovereignty, security and the protection of critical infrastructure, which extends to the systems FRCS relies on to secure our borders and collect revenue.

Key Provisions Relevant to FRCS's Mandate

Several provisions of the two Treaties fall squarely within our responsibilities:

- Article 3(7) of the Vuvale Union commits both Parties to deepen people linkages by strengthening border management systems and enhancing mobility settings. This is core FRCS business.
- Article 3(3)(b) commits the Parties to support the transition to a digital economy, which includes the digitisation of trade, customs and revenue systems.
- Article 4(4)(c) commits both Parties to action against transnational crime and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, areas where Customs enforcement is a frontline function.

- Article 4(4)(d) and (e) commit the Parties to strengthening the security of critical infrastructure, technology and cyberspace and to integrated policing, defence and border protection – FRCS systems and data infrastructure fall within the definition of critical infrastructure under Article 4(6).
- Under the Veitacini Treaty, Article 4 (Cooperation) and Article 7 (Visiting Forces) provide the framework within which border and enforcement cooperation, including any joint training or capability support would be conducted.

Existing and Proposed Areas of Cooperation

FRCS already works closely with the Australian Border Force (ABF) under the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Partnership and the ABF-FRCS Joint Forward Work Program 2025-2026. This programme is aligned to five practical lines of effort: maritime capability; intelligence and targeting; cargo, container, and mail screening; trade enforcement and compliance; and leadership, mentoring, and gender equality. It therefore provides a strong, tested platform for implementing the Treaty commitments.

In the maritime domain, the Australian Government has funded two littoral vessels for FRCS. Five FRCS officers have already obtained maritime licences, with further vessel-handling, small-craft search, boarding and maritime qualification training being planned. ABF has also supported the Vuvale Maritime Essential Services Centre and delivered multi-agency maritime intelligence and targeting training involving FRCS, the Fiji Navy, Police, Fisheries, and Immigration.

In intelligence and targeting, ABF has provided operational mentoring, radio and inspection equipment, advanced training on narcotics concealment and international supply-chain threats, and support from its National Border Targeting Centre. ABF also helped coordinate Canadian and regional training on traveller, air-cargo, and postal targeting, and has shared intelligence that led to targeted examinations of air-mail and sea-cargo consignments.

At Nadi International Airport, ABF funded 46 CCTV cameras across arrivals, departures, and baggage-hall areas, together with upgrades establishing an FRCS CCTV Control Room. The control room became operational in June 2026, and the completed capability was officially handed over in August 2026. This is a concrete example of Treaty-aligned investment in critical border infrastructure.

For container and cargo security, ABF has supported FRCS's Container Inspection Modernisation Project through strategic advice on design, policy, governance, and operations. Australian budget assistance is supporting proposed container examination facilities in Suva and Lautoka, while DFAT has funded a dedicated project manager and ABF technical experts have contributed to the concept of operations and project oversight.

In trade enforcement and compliance, ABF worked with FRCS to develop the Customs Penalty Matrix and Case Assessment Tool launched in January 2026, supported discussion on port security, insider threats, and supply-chain integrity, and provided an Australian study tour on

trade compliance and trade services. Cooperation is also expanding into trade-based money laundering through Project Lighthouse and future regional capacity building.

The partnership also invests in people and institutional integrity. It has supported frontline mentoring, detector-dog expertise, access to customs and border-management study pathways, review of integrity and professional-standards frameworks, and the Pacific Women's Professional Development Program, including seven FRCS officers among its current and emerging women leaders.

These outcomes demonstrate that cooperation with Australia is already improving Fiji's operational capability. The Treaty framework can now help both countries sustain, scale and better coordinate that work over the proposed ten-year horizon. The Written Analysis also identifies further areas where cooperation can deepen:

- Enhanced maritime surveillance and interdiction capability to support control of Fiji's maritime domain and detection of trafficking, including drug submersibles and related concealment methods.
- Digital transformation of business and regulatory services, including modernised border management technology, to reduce manual processing and strengthen information security.
- Stronger circular migration and border security settings, including enhanced visa arrangements and skills cooperation, which will affect passenger and traveller processing at the border.
- Biosecurity, certification, and market access cooperation to support agricultural diversification, which requires close coordination between Customs and biosecurity authorities at the border.

FRCS's Responsibilities under the Proposed 10-Year Work Plan

The transformative initiatives identified in the Written Analysis map closely onto FRCS's core functions. In particular, FRCS expects to have a direct role in:

- Tackling transnational crime through a step change in law enforcement cooperation and enhanced maritime surveillance and interdiction capability;
- Boosting economic growth and security through the digital transition of trade and revenue systems and stronger protection of cyber security and critical infrastructure; and
- Enhancing circular migration through stronger border security settings that enable expanded, well-managed mobility.

Anticipated Benefits and Opportunities for Fiji

- Modernised, digitised border and revenue systems, reducing processing times and manual handling for both trade and travellers;
- Stronger detection and interdiction capability against smuggling, illegal fishing and organised crime operating through Fiji's ports and maritime domain;

- Uplift in staff capability through skills transfer, training pathways, and closer operational cooperation with Australian counterpart agencies; and
- Strengthened protection of the digital and physical infrastructure that FRCS depends on to collect revenue and secure the border.

Legislative, Policy, Regulatory, Institutional and Administrative Requirements

- Institutional arrangements to support any embedded officer, attaché or joint training arrangements with Australian border and revenue agencies; and
- Alignment of FRCS's digital transformation programme with the whole-of-government approach to critical infrastructure and cybersecurity referenced in Article 4 of the Vuvale Union.

Financial, Staffing, Infrastructure and Capacity-Building Implications

FRCS notes that resourcing for capital investment under the Vuvale Union Work Plan is expected to be provided through Fiji's ordinary annual budgeting process, with Australian support for infrastructure, technical assistance, and capacity-building subject to policy priorities on both sides. For FRCS specifically, this is likely to involve:

- Investment in border technology and digital systems, including cybersecurity uplift for revenue and customs infrastructure;
- Staffing and training investment to support new surveillance, intelligence, and enforcement functions; and
- Infrastructure works at key ports, airports, and border posts, consistent with the broader infrastructure priorities noted in the Written Analysis, including airport and port upgrades that affect Customs operations.

Key Issues, Risks and Challenges

Experience under the Joint Forward Work Program also shows that long-term success will depend on clear milestones, trained personnel, sustainable maintenance and operating budgets, and the timely renewal of the ABF-FRCS Memorandum of Understanding so that information-sharing and operational cooperation remain fit for the current threat environment.

- Fiji's limited implementation capacity relative to the scale of ambition, requiring a realistic, phased sequencing of initiatives over the ten-year Work Plan;
- The need for robust safeguards around information-sharing arrangements, to protect taxpayer and traveller data while enabling effective cooperation;
- Cybersecurity exposure of border and revenue systems as they are identified as critical infrastructure, requiring sustained investment rather than a one-off uplift; and

- Ensuring that closer operational cooperation is implemented in a manner that respects Fiji's sovereignty and decision-making, consistent with the Pacific Way principles embedded in both Treaties

Closing Remarks

Honourable Chairperson, FRCS supports the Vuvale Union and the Veitacini Treaty as far as they strengthen our ability to protect Fiji's border, facilitate legitimate trade and travel and collect the revenue Government depends on, while managing the risks that come with deeper integration. We look forward to the Committee's questions and to continuing to work with the Committee as this process moves forward.

Vinaka Vakalevu.

[VERBATIM REPORT]

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

UNION/TREATY

(1) FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION
(2) OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE
(VEITACINI TREATY)

ENTITY: (1) Fiji Revenue and Customs Service

VENUE: Big Committee Room (East Wing)
DATE: Friday, 4th September, 2026

The Committee resumed at 10.20 a.m.

Interviewee/Submittee: Fiji Revenue and Customs Service

In Attendance:

(1) Mr. Udit Singh - Chief Executive Officer (CEO)
(2) Mr. Shavindra Nath - Director Corporate Services

(Opening remarks by Deputy Chairperson and brief overview of the Committee's mandate, purpose of meeting and meeting procedures, as well as introduction of Committee Members)

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Today, the Committee will receive an in-person submission from the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service (FRCS) in relation to the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance Treaty (Veitacini Treaty) currently before the Committee. I now invite the FRCS Officials to introduce themselves and proceed with their submission. Please, note that microphones should be turned on before you speak and turned off immediately after speaking to avoid any disruption to the live submission.

(Introduction of FRCS Officials)

MR. U. SINGH.- Deputy Chairperson, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you, on behalf of the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service (FRCS), to make a public submission on the FijiAustralia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance or the Veitacini Treaty. I will focus on what these arrangements mean for FRCS, as Fiji's revenue and border management agency, the cooperation that has already been delivered with Australia, and the practical issues that must be addressed during the implementation of these Treaties.

Firstly, why does the Treaties matter to FRCS? Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, FRCS protects Fiji's borders, facilitates legitimate trade and travel, and collects revenue that funds public services. The Treaties, therefore, intersect directly with our mandate.

The Vuvale Union commits both countries to stronger border management and mobility settings, digital transformation, action against transnational crime, and protection of critical infrastructure and cyberspace. The Veitacini Treaty provides a wider framework for security cooperation, training and capability support. For FRCS, this is not simply a foreign policy matter, it affects how we identify high-risk passengers and cargo, how we secure our ports and

airports, how we exchange intelligence, and how we modernise customs and revenue systems and protect sensitive taxpayer and traveller information.

As you are all aware, in terms of funding and the working plan overview, Australia has approved a 10-year workplan containing financial commitments and policy cooperation. The announced package exceeds approximately FJD1.5 billion, comprising around FJD1.05 billion in grants and FJD550 million in loans. The commitment that is most relevant to FRCS includes, FJD284 million for transnational crime and illicit drugs; FJD146 million for digital transformation, cyber security and skills, substantial support for maritime port and other nation-building infrastructure, including $48 million for economic security and supply chain resilience; and $87 million for circular mobility skills and a new border management system. Implementation will be agreed jointly by Fiji and Australia and may change as priorities develop.

The Ministerial Vuvale Forum and Senior Officials Vuvale Bukmak should provide mechanisms for setting priorities, monitoring delivery, and resolving cross-agency issues. I would like to now outline the existing Australian Border Force and FRCS cooperation.

The strongest case for deeper cooperation is the work that has already been delivered through the Australian Border Force and the FRCS Joint Forward Work Programme 2025-2026. It covers maritime capability, intelligence and targeting, cargo screening, trade enforcement and compliance and staff capability.

In the maritime domain, honourable Members, Australia has funded two littoral vessels for FRCS. Five FRCS Officers have obtained maritime licences with further vessel handling, small craft search and border training planned. The Australian Border Force has also supported the Vuvale Maritime Essential Services Centre and multi-agency maritime intelligence training.

For intelligence and targeting, the Australian Border Force has provided frontline mentoring, radios, binoculars and specialist inspection cameras. It has also provided training on narcotics concealment and some supply chain threats, and support from International Border Training Centre's intelligence shared by the Australian Border Force which has led to targeted examinations of airmail and sea cargo concealments.

At the Nadi Airport, the Australian Border Force has funded 46 CCTV cameras across arrivals, departures and baggage areas and supported the establishment of the FRCS CCTV Control Room which has become operational in June 2026.

For container security, the Australian Border Force has supported FRCS's container inspection modernisation project through advice on design, governance and operations. Honourable

Members, we are building two container facilities in Suva and Lautoka. DFAT has also funded a dedicated project manager to support these facilities and their build.

In trade enforcement, the Australian Border Force has helped develop a Customs penalty matrix and case assessment tool which has been launched in January 2026. The co-operation is expanding into trade-based money laundering, from Project Lighthouse.

The partnership has also supported integrity and professional standards work, detector dog capability, frontline mentoring and study pathways in the Pacific Women's Professional Development Programme, which has included seven FRCS Officers among its emerging women leaders. These are practical outcomes. Better equipment, stronger intelligence, more capable officers, improved surveillance and modernised enforcement tools. They demonstrate that the bilateral relationship is already strengthening Fiji's border capability.

In terms of priorities for the next phase, the Treaties and the 10-year workplan give Fiji an opportunity to scale this cooperation into a coordinated programme. For FRCS, the priorities should be very clear - modernized border and revenue systems, including a secure border management platform that provides passenger processing, while strengthening risk assessment and intelligence sharing.

It should also strengthen maritime surveillance, container and cargo examination as we are doing, airport targeting and responses to illicit drugs, organised crime and illegal trade. It should also protect Customs and revenue technology as critical national infrastructure to sustain cyber security investment. We also plan to build specialist capability in targeting, investigations, digital forensics, trade-based money laundering, leadership and integrity.

In terms of implementation, requirements and risks, funding and equipment alone will not deliver lasting capability. Each initiative should have an agreed outcome, accountable owner, delivery timetable and measures of operational benefit. Fiji must also plan for staffing, training, maintenance, licences, connectivity and operating costs over the full life of new assets and systems.

Finally, closer cooperation must respect Fiji's sovereignty and decision-making. Priority should be jointly agreed, aligned with Fiji national strategies and implemented through Fiji institutions so that capability remains here after individual projects conclude.

Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, FRCS supports the Vuvale Union and the Veitacini Treaty, where it strengthens Fiji's ability to secure its borders, combat transnational crime, facilitate legitimate trade and travel, and protects the revenue that the Government of Fiji depends on.

The existing partnership with the Australian Border Force gives us a credible foundation. The task is now to convert the 10-year commitment into a focused programme with measurable border outcomes, sustained capability and appropriate safeguards. The FRCS stands ready to work with Government, Australian counterparts and other border agencies to achieve that result. Thank you.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- I open the floor for questions and answers.

HON. V. LAL.- Deputy Chairperson, through you, thank you, CEO, for your presentation. I am really concerned about Article 3(7), which talks about strengthening border management systems and enhancing mobility settings. What I understand is that this is going to commit FRCS to integrate our databases with Australian Border Force systems. Sir, my question to you is, how will Fiji protect our national tax and fiscal data privacy if we accede to this Treaty?

MR. U. SINGH.- Deputy Chairperson, sovereignty is an important question. We have been working with the Office of the Solicitor-General in this regard, in terms of how we can ring-fence our data and put the correct safeguards in place to ensure that our data is confidentially protected if and when we interact with the Australian Border Force or any of our Australian counterparts. In any interaction that we undertake, there will be appropriate safeguards to protect confidentiality of information.

HON. V. LAL.- May I refer you to Article 7 of the Veitacini Treaty. Does this Treaty obligate FRCS to waive all excise and import duties and port usage charges on fuel, provisions and construction materials imported for the exclusive use of visiting foreign military forces?

MR. U. SINGH.- Not exactly in all cases. Any conditions will have to come through the Minister and any bilateral agreement that has already been made. In certain projects, these are set up before the project is instituted, in terms of the Ministry of Finance having a say in how these are conducted but in bilateral exchanges, some of these concessions are generally brought to bear for the good of the nation, obviously, honourable Lal.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- So, what trade compliance, tax evasion and border security vetting processes will FRCS establish to evaluate applicant nations before Fiji grants consent for their accession to the Alliance?

MR. U. SINGH.- If you are talking about other nations?

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Fiji and Australia.

MR. U. SINGH.- A lot of these are coming through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs where there are issues related to sovereignty. We work with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other agencies, to ensure that we are not contravening our own confidentiality issues or legislation, Deputy Chairperson.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- How do you look at the transition to deeper rules of trade base integration with Australia and how would it affect the customs duty and import tariff collections for

FRCS?

MR. U. SINGH.- So, a lot of these trade issues will defer to the trade treaties we have with Australia, whether it is with the PACER Plus or other treaties that we have by EPA. So they will defer to those Treaties.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Through you, Deputy Chairperson, in Article 11(1) of the Ocean of Peace Alliance, in regard to enforcing tax and excise compliance without judicial arbitration, it states that the dispute shall not be referred to any national or international tribunal or court or any other third party for resolution. If a tax compliance or smuggling dispute arises involving foreign military supplies or personnel, how will the FRCS enforce national excise laws when external and legal arbitration are completely barred?

MR. U. SINGH.- Thank you, honourable Member. I have had some discussions with the High Commissioner on this, and they have said that they have inserted a number of other alternative dispute resolution clauses in some of their Treaties with other countries, and they are very happy to provide similar pathways for this Treaty in terms of moving forward.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- That is very encouraging because I had asked the same question to all other submittees that appeared before the Standing Committee and I believe that the wording is quite stringent, giving little space to try to resolve dispute resolution in the Treaty. I thank you for that, CEO.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- With the integration of all these advanced technologies in FRCS, how do you look at specialised personnel, whether they will be coming from Australia or whether they are locals or even if locals go through a training, how do you plan to retain them?

MR. U. SINGH.- That is a very good point, Deputy Chairperson. That is a challenge that we have, and we are seeing this, sort of, materialise in our detector dog programme. We train our detector dog police teams, and they move overseas because it is highly sought after.

However, it is making sure that we can pay them well, we can remunerate them well, and we can recognise their capability here in Fiji and provide them with an equivalent level of challenge and, certainly, lifestyle, but it is a challenge and a point that is well made. We need to have succession plans, and we need to make sure that we are multi-skilling our people to be able to step in if these people are moving on.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- In terms of procurement, whatever technology FRCS needs to integrate, is it up to FRCS to purchase or procure, or there is a part in the agreement that it must be procurred only from Australia?

MR. U. SINGH.- The requirements are accent jointly. It is a standard that, obviously, the Australian Border Force, and we have been working with them particularly, for example, in the two vessels that we are putting on the water soon. They have actually helped us procure that. It has been procured locally but it has been procurred with Australian standards. There is a framework around how we actually work through some of those requirements, but certainly, it is an approach where both of us are working jointly on these matters.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- CEO, looking at your succession plan and looking at what this Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union is all about, would you see the Fijian Customs and Border Control to be as equivalent as the Australian Customs and Border Control? Are we levelling up to what Australia has or is offering right now, is that the path?

MR. U. SINGH.- Certainly, that is the aspiration. The Australian Border Force has got a very large footprint. They have very high standards, and we aspire to be like some of their smaller State operations, some of their provincials, so we are bringing some of the technology back to Fiji.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Deputy Chairperson, through you, I noticed that there has been enormous investment, especially into the infrastructure. My question is the sustainability of the border surveillance infrastructure after a withdrawal. Now, Article 15(1) states that a party membership ceases and there is a 12-month window after a Party withdraws from the Treaty. So, if a Party abruptly withdraws, how will FRCS rapidly replace the joint maritime surveillance database, satellite tracking data, customs intelligence feeds, lost during the 12-month transition period I hope you get the question, Sir.

MR. U. SINGH.- That is a good question. This is a very important aspect of this Vuvale Treaty, and if I could put it in very plain language, is that they are teaching us how to fish, not giving us the fish. So, they are building capability that is enduring, and we certainly see that in some of the work that we are doing.

A lot of the databases are not connected because there is a thing coming through that we are connecting databases. Our databases are independent. However, they are providing us with the frameworks that actually raise the standards that are equivalent to what they are providing. So, I would imagine that there would be a transition, if there is a parting of ways, or suddenly, we actually decide that we are not going to continue in this Treaty and that we need to have some succession planning and some disaster recovery or backup plans for every initiative that will have impact on our Government, or certainly, on our operations nationally.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- CEO, before you, the Ministry of Immigration was here, and I flipped the question to them regarding the financial scams and crimes but coming further to how people who owe massive tax to the country have fled the country. From FRCS, what gaps are being filled in the sense that we do not see a similar incident happening again from FRCS with the Ministry of Immigration? The Ministry of Immigration, sort of, said something along the lines that they will not be having Customs Officers from FRCS, they will rather be taking over, or something along those lines. Can you just elaborate your position on this?

MR. U. SINGH.- Well, as it stands at the moment, the primary line that is made-up of Customs Officers is under mandate of the Immigration Act, so they provide the mandate for us to actually man the primary line. Certainly, at any time, they can take that back and operate it themselves, in which case they will be solely responsible for the border. At this point in time, it is a joint border operation.

In terms of people actually being allowed to exit the country, it is a coordinated effort. There is a new system being put in place. One of the controls that we are putting in place is our ability to load Departure Orders directly into the system immediately as they arise, and one of the issues that arose was the coordination between our agencies.

HON. V. LAL.- Deputy Chairperson, through you, just a last one from me; I can see that Article 4 requires the parties to maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to protect their sovereignty. Does this mean that FRCS will be forced to divert its capital budget into investing expensive military-grade maritime border surveillance or Custom's patrol vessels because you are individually asked to invest in that? Where is the money going to come from or the budget will be diverted towards collecting taxes here or investing in those expensive boats?

MR. U. SINGH.- Thank you, honourable Lal. We have our own CAPEX programme that is sanctioned by our Board and by the Ministry of Finance, so it is not affected by the Vuvale Partnership *per se*. However, we are a large benefactor of what is coming out of the Vuvale Partnership in terms of vessels, assets and technology. So, the actual flow of cash is the other

way around. We have our ongoing CAPEX programme, which we will continue to grow our capability, but we are certainly not putting our money into there.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- CEO and your Team from FRCS, I wish to sincerely thank you for availing yourselves for this meeting. We appreciate your time and cooperation, and we look forward to your continued engagement should the Committee require any further information.

On that note, I declare this meeting closed.

The Committee meeting adjourned at 10.45 a.m.

Ms. LaisaDigitaki and

Ms. Natasha Digitaki Weleilakeba

(Concerned Fijian Citizens)

PUBLIC SUBMISSION

Submission on the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and Veitacini Treaty

Request to defer parliamentary approval pending full disclosure, adequate consultation and consideration by the next Parliament

Submitted by: Laisa Digitaki and Natasha Digitaki Weleilakeba, concerned Fijian citizens.

Submitted to: Chairperson and Members, Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

Date: September 2026

Purpose: Written hard-copy submission and request to make an oral presentation

Executive recommendation

The Committee should recommend that Parliament does not approve the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union or the Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty) during the present parliamentary term. Consideration of ratification should be left to the Parliament constituted after the forthcoming General Election, after publication of the complete implementation architecture, independent legal and fiscal assessment and a meaningful period of public consultation.

This submission does not oppose Australia or the bilateral friendship. It recognises the considerable value of Australian support to Fiji. Its position is that assistance, friendship and strategic cooperation increase, not reduce the need for transparent, sovereign and democratic decision-making.

1. Why approval should be deferred

1.1 The consultation period is not proportionate to the treaties

The Committee webpage records publication of the two treaties and the Written Analysis on 27 August 2026. The public notice fixes 9 September 2026 as the submission deadline. Citizens therefore received roughly two weeks to assess instruments intended to operate indefinitely and covering economic integration, fiscal policy, critical infrastructure, technology, cyber security, border protection, policing, defence, mutual security obligations and visiting forces.

Meaningful consultation requires more than the opportunity to send comments. It requires enough time and enough disclosed information for citizens to form an informed view.

1.2 The democratic context warrants restraint

Fiji is in a period of constitutional and electoral transition. The Constitution Review Commission's work is before the President and the country is within the period leading to a General Election that must be held no later than 6 February 2027. The current Parliament retains legal authority, but prudence requires distinguishing legal capacity from democratic wisdom. These treaties will bind governments and citizens well beyond the present parliamentary term.

No public material reviewed for this submission demonstrates an emergency requiring ratification before the election. If Government relies upon urgency, the Committee should require the reason, evidence and consequences of delay to be placed on the public record.

1.3 The implementation architecture is incomplete

The Written Analysis refers to an agreed Work Plan for the first ten years and indicates that resources are earmarked by sector. The Committee webpage presently lists only the Vuvale Union, the Veitacini Treaty and the Written Analysis. The ten-year Work Plan is not listed.

Parliament should not approve the legal framework before seeing the principal plan by which it will be

operationalised. The same applies to side letters, subsidiary agreements, implementing arrangements, legal opinions, fiscal modelling and contemplated visiting-forces terms.

2. The financial relationship requires a reconciled public ledger

Australia's support has been substantial and valuable. The figures below should be described precisely and they are Australian official development assistance (ODA) benefiting Fiji, not cash handed in full to the Fiji Government.

For the avoidance of doubt, this submission does not suggest that Australian assistance purchases Fiji's consent, creates a political debt, or should be treated as consideration for ratification.

Australian FY	ODA benefiting Fiji	Status
2019–20	A$80.898m	Actual
2020–21	A$187.624m	Actual
2021–22	A$168.422m	Actual
2022–23	A$149.256m	Actual
2023–24	A$171.170m	Actual
2024–25	A$154.468m	Actual
Total to June 2025	A$911.838m	Actual
2025–26	A$123.1m	Budget estimate
Actual + estimate	A$1.034938bn	Working total

Using the indicative conversion published by Australia in July 2025, A$500 million being approximately FJ$734 million, the A$911.838 million actual total is roughly FJ$1.34 billion. Including the 2025-26 Australian budget estimate produces a working figure of approximately FJ$1.52 billion. Exchange rate movements and final actual expenditure will affect the exact amount.

This submission therefore uses the phrase "approximately FJ$1.5 billion in Australian ODA benefiting Fiji during the

Vuvale era", while expressly distinguishing actual expenditure from budget estimates and assistance benefiting Fiji from money received directly into the Fiji Government's accounts.

2.1 Cumulative sector allocation, 2019-20 to 2024-25

Sector	AUD	Share
Governance	A$360.353m	39.5%
Education	A$133.046m	14.6%
Health	A$124.747m	13.7%
Economic infrastructure and services	A$112.179m	12.3%
Humanitarian and resilience	A$79.714m	8.7%
Agriculture, trade and production	A$52.220m	5.7%
Multisector/general development	A$49.580m	5.4%

These are Australian ODA classifications, not Fiji ministry expenditure accounts. They should be reconciled with Fiji's own receipts and expenditure records rather than treated as an audited statement of how Fiji Government spent the funds.

2.2 Direct budget support and traceability

Australia records approximately A$351 million in general and targeted budget-support commitments to the Government of Fiji between 2019-20 and 2024-25. Fiji's budget documents separately record substantial Australian grants-in-aid as Government revenue. These ledgers overlap and must not be added together.

Fiji FY	Australian grants-in-aid recorded	Status
2020–21	FJ$154.773m	Actual
2021–22	FJ$138.076m	Actual
2022–23	FJ$124.671m	Actual
2023–24	FJ$139.304m	Actual
Four-year total	FJ$556.824m	Actual
2024–25	FJ$105.701m	Revised estimate

2025–26	FJ$50.000m	Budget estimate

An independent DFAT evaluation of A$223.5 million in budget support during 2020-23 found that A$20 million in earmarked social-protection assistance could be traced to specific schemes. General budget support entered the overall fiscal system and exact attribution to individual expenditures was not possible. This is normal for general budget support, but it strengthens the case for disclosure of conditions, reform actions, audit mechanisms and outcomes.

2.3 Required financial register

The Committee should require a public Australia-Fiji Financial Assistance Register covering 2019 onward. Each material item should record:

- announcement and commitment date;
- appropriation and funding source;
- whether the amount is new, reallocated or already included in an earlier envelope;
- actual disbursement by year;
- amount received in Fiji Government accounts, where applicable;
- responsible Fiji ministry or implementing entity;
- programme and expenditure allocation;
- conditions or agreed reform actions;
- grant, loan, guarantee, technical assistance or in-kind classification; and
- measurable outputs, outcomes, acquittal and audit status.

3. Vuvale Union: provisions requiring further scrutiny

Provision	Effect	Required scrutiny
Arts 2–3	Progressive deepening and economic integration	Define the intended limits; disclose agreed fiscal reforms, multiyear budget support and Fiji counterpart costs.
Art 4	Critical infrastructure, technology, cyber, policing, defence, borders and third-country security concerns	Table legal advice on Fiji's continuing freedom to deal with all partners and threshold for mandatory consultation.

Arts 6–7	Vuvale Forum and Bukmak decisionmaking; long-term Work Plan	Publish the ten-year Work Plan; require publication and parliamentary reporting of decisions and commitments.
Art 8	Political dispute settlement; exclusion of courts, tribunals and third parties; possible suspension	Explain why all independent adjudication is excluded and establish protections for the smaller party.
Art 9	Amendment by written agreement, including possible retrospective effect	Require parliamentary scrutiny of material amendments and explain the need for retrospectivity.
Art 10	Indefinite duration; 24-month withdrawal period	Explain the two-year exit delay and provide mandatory periodic parliamentary review.
Art 11	Subsidiary agreements and implementing arrangements	Require publication and separate parliamentary scrutiny where arrangements create material legal, fiscal, security or rights consequences.

4. Veitacini Treaty: provisions requiring further scrutiny

Provision	Effect	Required scrutiny
Arts 4–6	Continuous defence cooperation, consultation and response to a common danger	Table constitutional advice on deployment authority, domestic processes, Parliament's role and Fiji's ten-year financial/personnel exposure.
Art 7	Development and maintenance of visiting-forces agreements and arrangements	Disclose terms on jurisdiction, immunity, weapons, customs, taxation, land/facilities, command, environment, claims and duration before ratification.
Art 10	Restriction on conduct undermining treaty performance; consultation on inconsistent arrangements	Explain practical effects on Fiji's future relations with third countries.
Art 11	Exclusion of courts, tribunals and third-party dispute settlement	Provide safeguards and justification for excluding independent resolution.
Arts 12, 15–16	Accession, indefinite operation, oneyear withdrawal and	Preserve Fiji's veto on accession and establish a three- or fiveyear parliamentary review rather than waiting ten years.

	review after ten years	

5. Meaning of "shared sovereignty"

The Written Analysis reportedly characterises "shared sovereignty" as a capability multiplier. The treaties also affirm sovereignty. The Committee should avoid both extremes for it should not assume the phrase proves a surrender of sovereignty, but it should not leave the phrase unexplained.

Government should define every function in which authority is intended to be jointly exercised, integrated or coordinated, including fiscal policy dialogue, borders, intelligence, cyber systems, critical infrastructure, policing, defence and external security relationships. It should also identify who takes the decision, under which law, with what review and how Fiji may say no.

6. Documents and witnesses the Committee should require

Before recommending approval, the Committee should obtain and publish, subject only to tightly justified redactions:

- the complete agreed ten-year Vuvale Union Work Plan and all schedules;
- all side letters, agreed minutes, memoranda, subsidiary agreements and implementing arrangements already negotiated or contemplated;
- a consolidated ten-year fiscal-impact statement separating Australian grants, Fiji counterpart funding, loans, guarantees, contingent liabilities and recurrent costs;
- the Australia-Fiji Financial Assistance Register described above;
- legal opinions on section 51 approval, treaty implementation, mutual defence, RFMF deployment, dispute clauses, third-country relationships and the meaning of "shared sovereignty";
- the contemplated model or draft visiting-forces agreement;
- privacy, cyber-security and data-governance assessments for border, intelligence and digital integration;
- environmental and land-access assessments for any proposed facilities or forward operating locations; and

- a statement explaining the asserted urgency, if any, for ratification before the General Election.

The Committee should hear evidence from Foreign Affairs, Defence, Finance, the RFMF, the Attorney-General or Solicitor-General, the treaty negotiators, Immigration/Border authorities, relevant infrastructure and cyber agencies and independent constitutional, public-finance and security experts.

7. Recommendations

1. Defer parliamentary approval. Recommend that neither treaty be approved during the present parliamentary term and that ratification be considered by the Parliament constituted after the General Election.
2. Publish the implementation architecture. Release the ten-year Work Plan and all material subsidiary, side-letter and implementing documents before any future approval motion.
3. Provide full fiscal disclosure. Table a ten-year fiscal-impact statement and the reconciled financial assistance register.
4. Require independent legal scrutiny. Publish advice addressing mutual defence, deployment, dispute settlement, third-country relations, amendments, withdrawal and "shared sovereignty".
5. Reserve consequential instruments for Parliament. Require separate scrutiny of any visiting forces agreement and any material agreement affecting law, expenditure, rights, security, land, environment or sovereign choice.
6. Extend public consultation. Begin a fresh, adequate consultation period only after the missing documents are publicly available.
7. Create continuing oversight. Require annual public reports from the Vuvale Forum and Bukmak and a mandatory parliamentary review after three or five years.
8. If Government nevertheless proceeds now, condition approval on formal interpretive assurances and safeguards covering each matter above.

8. Conclusion

Australia's assistance to Fiji is a reason for gratitude and careful accounting. It is not a reason to reduce scrutiny. The proposed relationship is intended to be deeper, broader and indefinite. Its legitimacy will be

stronger if Fiji acts with full information, public confidence and a renewed democratic mandate.

A genuine friendship should withstand sunlight, questions and a short wait. An agreement intended to shape Fiji for decades should survive another five months of scrutiny.

The Committee is therefore respectfully requested to recommend that Parliament withhold approval during the present term and leave the final decision to the Parliament constituted after the forthcoming General Election.

Request to present orally

We respectfully request an opportunity to appear before the Standing Committee and present the central recommendations in this submission orally.

Sources relied upon

- Parliament of the Republic of Fiji, Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence webpage: treaty texts and Written Analysis published 27 August 2026.
- Fiji–Australia Vuvale Union, signed 6 July 2026.
- Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty), signed 6 July 2026.
- Parliamentary Written Analysis of the two treaties, published 27 August 2026.
- Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, annual ODA statistical summaries, 2019–20 to 2024–25.
- Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Development Partnership with Fiji and Fiji budget estimates for 2025–26 and 2026–27.
- Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Fiji Recovery and Resilience Budget Support 2020–23 Evaluation Report.
- Government of Fiji, Ministry of Finance budget addresses and budget estimates recording Australian grants-in-aid.
- Constitution of the Republic of Fiji, section 51, and Parliament Standing Orders governing treaty scrutiny.

Key official links

- https://www.parliament.gov.fj/committees/standing-committee-on-foreign-affairs-and-defence/
- https://www.dfat.gov.au/countries/fiji/fiji-australia-vuvale-union
- https://www.dfat.gov.au/countries/fiji/ocean-peace-alliance-veitacini-treaty
- https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/fiji/development-assistance/development-partnership-with-fiji

Submission details

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[VERBATIM REPORT]

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

UNION/TREATY

(1) FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION
(2) OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE (VEITACINI TREATY)

SUBMITTEE: (1) Ms. Laisa Digitaki
(2) Ms. Natasha Digitaki Weleilakeba
VENUE: Big Committee Room (East Wing)
DATE: Monday, 7th September, 2026

VERBATIM REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE HELD AT THE COMMITTEE ROOM (EAST WING), PARLIAMENT PRECINCTS, GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, ON MONDAY, 7TH SEPTEMBER, 2026, AT 10.15 A.M.

Present

Hon. L.S. Qereqeretabua	-	Chairperson
Hon. R.R. Sharma	-	Deputy Chairperson
Hon. P.K. Ravunawa	-	Member
Hon. V. Lal	-	Member

Apologies

Hon. I. Tuiwailevu	-	Member
Hon. T.R. Matasawalevu	-	Member

In Attendance:

(1) Ms. Laisa Digitaki
(2) Ms. Natasha Digitaki Weleilakeba

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Good morning, honourable Members. I welcome Ms. Laisa Digitaki and Ms. Natasha Weleilakeba this morning. To the members of the public and members of the media and viewers, ladies and gentlemen, a very good morning to you all. It is my pleasure to welcome you to this room and those of you joining us via the live broadcast.

I wish to advise that pursuant to the Standing Orders of Parliament, specifically Standing Order 111, all Committee meetings are open to the public and to the media, so this submission is open. However, should there be any sensitive information relating to this submission that you cannot disclose publicly, this information may be supplied to the Committee either in writing or in a closed session. This is only permitted in limited circumstances, including matters that relate to national security, third party confidential information, personnel or human resource matters and also during the time when the Committee is deliberating, getting ready to write our report back to Parliament.

I wish to remind all honourable Members and the submittees that all comments and questions should be directed to me, the Chair. For viewers following this meeting live on *Facebook*, you can submit your questions via the comment section but, please, note that only relevant questions will be considered by the Committee. Members of the Committee may interject during your submission. Alternatively, we can raise our questions at the conclusion of your presentation.

I want to remind everyone present that this is a parliamentary proceeding, and all information provided is protected under the Parliamentary Powers and Privileges Act and the Standing Orders of Parliament. Slander and libel of any kind will not be condoned, and all information presented to the Committee should be factual.

In terms of protocol, movement within the Committee room should be kept to a minimum, and we ask that you, please, place your mobile phones on silent.

I want to introduce to you now the Members of my Committee. We have a couple who are missing, but we still have a quorum.

(Introduction of Committee Members)

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Today, members of the media and members of the public, the Committee will receive an in-person submission from Ms. Laisa Digitaki and Ms. Natasha Weleilakeba in relation to the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance or Veitacini Treaty currently before the Committee.

I am now inviting Ms. Digitaki to give us a little bit about your background and go right ahead with your submission.

MS. L. DIGITAKI.- Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, my name is Laisa Digitaki. I am an entrepreneur and have been in this space for a long time, for almost 30 years now. I am here with my daughter, Natasha Digitaki Weleilakeba, and she will introduce herself and start this conversation.

MS. N.D. Weleilakeba.- Madam Chairperson and honourable Members of the Committee, *bula vinaka*. Thank you for allowing ordinary citizens of Fiji to come and talk to you about these very important Treaties today. We are a mother-daughter team, and we are appearing before you in our own personal capacity as concerned Fijian citizens.

My name is Natasha Digitaki Uluilakeba and my mother is Laisa Digitaki. We are not here to attack Australia. Australia has been a longstanding friend of Fiji and its support during COVID19, natural disasters and periods of economic pressure has been valuable. We acknowledge that openly and with gratitude. However, gratitude is not the surrender of judgment, friendship is not a substitute for scrutiny, and where a treaty is intended to bind Fiji indefinitely, it should never depend upon being approved hurriedly by Parliament approaching the end of its electoral mandate.

Our central request is simple; that this Committee should recommend that Parliament does not approve either Treaty during the present parliamentary term. Consideration of ratification should be left to the Parliament constituted after the forthcoming general election, following full disclosure and meaningful public consultation.

We say this for five reasons:

(1) The public consultation period is too short. The Treaty documents appeared on Parliament Committee web page on 27th August, 2026, and submissions closed on 9th September,

2026. This is roughly two weeks for citizens to absorb two far-reaching Treaties and a Written Analysis dealing with economic integration, critical infrastructure, borders, cybersecurity, intelligence, defence, mutual security and visiting forces. These are not minor technical agreements.

One Treaty commits Fiji and Australia to progressively deepen a union and integrate their economies. The other establishes a mutual defence relationship. Decisions of that weight deserve more than a compressed consultation window.

Listening in to submissions broadcasted last week, we note that the Permanent Secretary of the Office of the Prime Minister confirmed with this Committee that the wider Fijian public was not directly consulted during the treaty negotiations. Officials also acknowledged that the meaning of armed attacks in relation to cyber attacks, blockades and undersea cables remains unclear and that several legal and operational matters are still to be worked through.

These developments reinforce, not diminish, the case for fuller disclosure and careful scrutiny before ratification.

May we also highlight that these commitments were not presented to the voters during the 2022 campaign. If Government believes it possesses an electoral mandate for an indefinite union, economic integration and Fiji first mutual defence alliance, we respectfully ask it to identify the manifesto commitment on which that mandate is based. The wider public was not consulted during negotiations; therefore, a mandate cannot be assumed after the 2022 election for commitments never placed before the people.

(2) Vital implementation information is missing. The Government-owned Written Analysis refers to an agreed workplan for the first 10 years and says that

resources have been earmarked across sectors. Yet, the workplan is not amongst the three documents currently published on the Committee website.

That is not a minor administrative attachment - it appears to be the operational roadmap for Treaties which rightfully should be the document that identifies the programmes, priorities, timelines, responsible agencies and resources that will turn broad Treaty language into action. Without it, Parliament is being asked to approve the framework while the practical commitments remain out of public view.

The statement that resources have already been earmarked raises serious and obvious questions. How much has been earmarked – by whom, from which budgets and what conditions? What must Fiji contribute, either in resources, grants, loans, guarantees or future appropriations? What safeguards will ensure that implementation remains accountable to Parliament rather than being settled later between officials behind closed doors?

Members should also ask; who has the authority to change this workplan after ratification? Can projects, priorities, expenditure and timelines be altered by officials through the bilateral bodies created by the Treaties? Would material changes return to Parliament, or would the original approval become a gateway through which new commitments could be added over the next decade without fresh scrutiny?

Those questions go directly to Parliament's continuing control over public money and national policy. At a minimum, Parliament should see every proposed initiative, the responsible agency, implementation dates, measurable outcomes, estimated annual costs, sources and form of funding, Fiji's counterpart obligations, procurement arrangements, and the process for review, amendment or termination.

If a small part is genuinely security sensitive, Government can identify that and justify a narrow redaction. A general appeal to confidentiality cannot justify withholding the entire roadmap from the institution being asked to approve these Treaties, nor should the Committee be told that these details can be supplied only after approval. The sequence is the safeguard and, that is, disclosure first, informed public consultation second, and Parliamentary consent only afterwards. Once an indefinite framework is approved, Parliament's practical bargaining power may be greatly reduced.

Scrutiny postponed is scrutiny weakened. How can Parliament or the public assess a 10-year relationship without seeing the plan that says what will actually be done, funded and prioritised? A Treaty cannot be judged by its aspirations alone but must also be judged by the machinery that creates and implements it.

We respectfully ask this Committee to require publication of the complete workplan and any attachments, allow adequate time for public scrutiny and decline to recommend approval unless and until that information is available. Parliament should not be asked to write a 10-year blank cheque for a programme it has not been permitted to read.

Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members of the Committee, I now call upon my mother, Laisa Digitaki, to continue from here.

MS. L. DIGITAKI.- Madam Chairperson and honourable Members of the Committee, thank you for listening to the beginning of this submission from my daughter. Before I proceed with some factual numbers to support our submission today, may I disclose that the numbers and data that I am about to share with you is already on public domain and was extracted from the Australian Government and Fiji Government online sources, including mainstream media and other verified sources.

(3) The third reason why we are asking that Fiji do not rush into any indefinite commitment just yet is that we can discern that Fiji must thoroughly and deeply understand the financial relationship, as well as the diplomatic language that is there in the Vuvale Union and Veitacini Treaty first and foremost. Since the Vuvale era began in 2019, Australia's official aid expenditure benefitting Fiji has reached approximately AUD911.8 million through to June 2025, and that is about FJD1.34 billion, using the indicative conversion Australia has itself used. Now, including Australia's published 2025 and 2026 estimate, it brings the working total to approximately FJD1.5 billion.

Now, let me be careful here and emphasise that it is not FJD1.5 billion handed to the Fiji Government as cash as you would, obviously, have noted. It includes budget support, programmes, technical assistance, scholarships, humanitarian support and other expenditure benefiting Fiji. However, a substantial amount has already entered Fiji's fiscal system as well and the Government's Written Analysis connects future predictable multiyear budget support to agreed reform priorities. That makes transparency even more essential.

We need one reconciled public register and I have been harping about this in all my social media posts because this, to me, is very important - transparency and accountability. We feel that we need one reconciled public register or dashboard showing commitment, appropriation, actual disbursement, Fiji receipt, programme allocation, expenditure and measurable outcome with grants, loans and guarantees separated, so announcements are not counted twice so that we can demarcate and know exactly what has been given and what has been used and for which particular expenditure line.

Treaties reach deeply into sovereign decision-making. We feel that the Vuvale Union covers economic integration and, of course, it does with physical stability, critical infrastructure, telecommunications, aviation, energy, cyber systems, policing, defense and borders. These are very big and very important topics and issues that Fiji must always remain vigilant about. It creates bilateral bodies able to consider and decide matters and permits future subsidiary agreements and implementing arrangements.The Veitacini Treaty treats an armed attack in the Pacific as a common danger. It requires ongoing defence cooperation and anticipates visiting forces arrangements. Of course, you would know visiting forces from other countries. Those future arrangements may determine criminal jurisdiction, immunity weapons, customs, land and facility access, environmental liability and command. Of course, you would have heard this from the Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs last week.

Parliament should see and scrutinise those terms before Fiji becomes bound to the larger framework. Both Treaties also exclude courts, tribunal and third-party dispute resolution, and I saw this as one of the key components that was coming through last week, which is fantastic. Fijian and Australia are friends, but they are not equal in economic or strategic way, and that is very important for us to remember always. So, when independent adjudication is excluded, the smaller State, which is Fiji, in this instance, must be especially certain that its safeguards are very clear.

(5) The democratic timing matters. As we all aware, Fiji is simultaneously considering the Constitutional Review Commission's work and moving forward, we have a general election that is before us. It must happen no later than 6th February, 2027. Of course, the Constitutional Review Commission has submitted its final report and draft Bill to His Excellency the President, with Cabinet and Parliamentary consideration that is still ahead of us.

Now, the present Parliament remains legally empowered to act on the Vuvale Union and Veitacini Treaty as is right now, but our argument is not that it lacks

authority - our argument is that having the legal power is not the same as exercising it prudently at this moment.

These commitments were not presented to the electorate during the 2022 campaign by any of the political parties that are sitting in the Coalition Government today. So, if Government believes it has a mandate for an indefinite union, economic integration, and Fiji's first mutual defense alliance, we, again, respectfully, ask that you identify the manifesto commitment on which it relies.

The wider public was not consulted during negotiations, as Natasha had highlighted. A mandate cannot be manufactured retrospectively. The people who elect the next Parliament will have to live with its commitments and there is no publicly demonstrated emergency requiring approval before they vote. If there is such an urgency, we would request that Government should state it plainly and support it with evidence.

Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, what we are basically asking your Committee to recommend is that:

(1) Parliament withhold the approval of both Treaties during the present parliamentary term.

(2) The complete 10-year workplan, all side letters to it, and material implementation documents be published.

(3) Government provides a 10-year fiscal impact statement and a reconciled Australia-Fiji Financial Assistance Register from 2019 onwards. I would like to expand on that. While we were doing the research, there was no clear timeline on what came out and what was used - it was just a rough kind of estimate and I think that we owe it to the people of Fiji who are much more discerning these days with a plethora of information that is out there that we present the facts and all these prudent information to them.

(4) Independent constitutional and legal advice be tabled on mutual defence, deployment authority, dispute settlement, the shared sovereignty, and Fiji's freedom to deal with third countries.

(5) Any visiting forces agreement and any material subsidiary agreement return to Parliament for separate scrutiny.

(6) Citizens receive a proper consultation period after those documents are released.

(7) The newly elected parliament decide whether Fiji should ratify, renegotiate or decline these Treaties.

In closing, Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, this is not an anti-Australia position, as Natasha had indicated right from the outset. It is a very 'poor Fiji position', and we believe it is also consistent with honest friendship that the '*vuvale*' and '*veitacini*' and family means.

Australia has been Fiji's friend for generations - a genuine friendship, and family members should be able to withstand sunlight, questions and a short wait for the Fijian people to renew their democratic mandate. An agreement intended to shape Fiji for decades should survive a period of no more than five months of scrutiny, as we are only about five months from elections anyway.

Please, do not ask our people to trust a 10-year plan they have not been shown. Please, do not approve an "indefinite union first and discover its operating terms later". Give the next Parliament the evidence, the time and the mandate to make this decision properly. If these Treaties are strong enough to bind Fiji indefinitely, they are strong enough to wait for the informed consent of the Fijian people.

Vinaka vakalevu and *malo* for giving Natasha and I the opportunity to appear before your Committee and present our submission. May you, Madam Chairperson, and honourable Committee Members, be blessed with divine wisdom as you deliberate for the greater good of our beloved Fiji and all Fijians.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you very much, Ms. Digitaki and Ms. Weleilakeba for your openness and thank you for very succinctly outlining what you believe for these Treaties.

I now open the floor for any comments or questions from the Members of the Committee.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Thank you, Madam Chairperson, and thank you to the submittees. We have heard you very and we understand your position as well, and we have heard other submittees as well.

The Committee's work is to scrutinise these Treaties before us. A few things we need to also remember is that Australia has poured in billions of dollars, if you look at the last two decades. I know $150 million is going in the Pacific for the pre-planning of COP48, for fuel crisis, and we have $15 million for healthcare and education. Agreed, it is the largest bilateral partner to support the Pacific. Yes, I absolutely agree regarding the sunset clause, regarding the disputes

that are logged in internally, and rather it would be an executive sign-off rather than having a parliamentary debate.

What I loved about your presentation was, yes, we need succession plans. Governments will come and go, but there needs to be a succession plan to be followed. The transparency, so when funds do come, where are they utilised? Absolutely! If it is for education, it should go to education. We should see schools built and teachers paid. They should have what it is aligned for, and the same for healthcare transparency and timeline.

Yes, I think the scope of this Treaty is quite broad because they have been helping out in our sectors and budget support for over a few decades. However, I think this is the move to formalise but, again, there are pros and cons to every document, which the Committee is here to receive submissions for. Otherwise, thank you, and your recommendations are noted from my end.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- I thank Ms. Laisa Digitaki and your daughter for appearing before the Committee this morning. In fact, you are the first civil society who appeared before us, and it is encouraging to see a family standing together to look at this Vuvale Union and the Veitacini Treaty. We have heard you well.

The Ocean of Peace Alliance notion was initiated by our honourable Prime Minister during the start of this Parliament. It was not part of the election campaign or manifesto of his Party, or even in any other political party. He mentioned it in the floor of Parliament, and then he ascended it to the Pacific Islands Forum where together, Pacific Leaders agreed unanimously to take on board the notion of the Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance.

In this Treaty and Union, we have noted the restriction in the terminology of the way the Articles were written and in giving some restriction and worry. Here we are talking about Fiji and our sovereignty, however, the honourable Prime Minister has put this forward and Australia has come on board.

As you have rightly mentioned, we must look at the whole picture in totality. The honourable Speaker has given these to this Standing Committee to look at it and present it back to Parliament within 30 days. We have heard from you. It will be part of our recommendation and presentation to the honourable Speaker and Parliament in our report. We thank you for honestly speaking your heart out to the Committee. I thank you sincerely for that.

HON. V. LAL.- On the same note, thank you, Ms. Laisa and Ms. Natasha for your presentation. We really appreciate your views, concerns and recommendations. I can also see the workplan. When I was going through it, I was also putting the10-year workplan and then not actually

defining what needs to be done, when and how. This is a concern to all of us, and I thank you very much for bringing this up and sharing your views.

This is mother and daughter first time coming here as a first public submission. Thanks so much and we really appreciate what you have given us. Your recommendations are well noted, and the Committee will look into them.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you, honourable Members. Laisa and Natasha, that leaves me to say thank you very much for being so forward and for the very deep research that you, obviously, have put into your submission today. We really do take note of your submission this morning and also your recommendations and we thank you for being so forthright. *Vinaka vakalevu*.

The Committee adjourned at 10.45 a.m.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Defence

- Foreign Affairs
- External Trade

[VERBATIM REPORT]

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

UNION/TREATY

(1) FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION
(2) OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE (VEITACINI TREATY)

ENTITY: Ministry of Foreign Affairs & External Trade
VENUE: Big Committee Room (East Wing)
DATE: Wednesday, 9th September, 2026

VERBATIM REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE HELD AT THE COMMITTEE ROOM (EAST WING), PARLIAMENT PRECINCTS, GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, ON WEDNESDAY,
9TH SEPTEMBER, 2026, AT 10.15 A.M.

Present:

Hon. L.S. Qereqeretabua	-	Chairperson
Hon. Rinesh Sharma	-	Deputy Chairperson
Hon. T.R. Matasawalu	-	Member
Hon. V. Lal	-	Member

Apologies

Hon. P.K. Ravunawa	-	Member
Hon. I. Tuiwailevu	-	Member

Interviewee/Submittee: Ministry of Foreign Affairs

In Attendance:

(1) Dr. Raijieli Taga - Permanent Secretary
(2) Mr. Anare Leweniqila - Acting Deputy Secretary

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Honourable Members, the Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade, Dr. Raijeli Taga, and Acting Deputy Secretary, Mr. Anare Leweniqila; good morning, as well as the members of the media and members of the public. It is my pleasure to welcome everyone in this room, as well as those joining us via the live broadcast.

Pursuant to the Standing Orders of Parliament, specifically Standing Order 111, all Committee meetings are open to the media and the public. However, if there is any sensitive information relating to this submission that cannot be disclosed publicly, such information may be provided to the Committee either in writing or during a closed session. This will only be permitted in limited circumstances, including matters relating to national security, third-party confidential information, personnel or human resource matters and Committee deliberation.

I wish to remind honourable Members this morning and the submittees that all comments and questions should be directed through me, the Chair, and for viewers following this meeting live on *Facebook*, you may submit questions via the comments section. Please, note that only relevant questions will be considered by the Committee. Members of the Committee may choose to ask your questions during your submission or, alternatively, we will have questions at the conclusion, if you have a presentation at the beginning.

I want to remind everyone present that this is a parliamentary proceeding and all information provided is protected under the Parliamentary Powers and Privileges Act and the Standing Orders of Parliament. We will not condone any slander or libel of any sort, and all information presented to the Committee should be factual. For protocol purposes, please, limit your movement within the room and we ask that you put your mobile phones on silent mode.

I will now introduce the Members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence.

(Introduction of Committee Members and Secretariat)

Honourable Members and members of the public, today, we will receive an in-person submission from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade, and the representatives are, as I have said, the Permanent Secretary and the Acting Deputy Secretary. If you have any remarks to open this submission with, please, go ahead. Please, also remember to turn on your microphone and turn it off afterwards.

DR. R. TAGA.- Madam Chairperson and honourable Members of the Standing Committee, first, we would like to thank the Committee for the invitation to come and present to the Committee on the subject matter at hand.

A very good morning to you all, honourable Members. Today, I have the privilege to deliver this statement on the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance or the Veitacini Treaty.

At the outset, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to present on these two agreements that Fiji has entered into, with one of Fiji's most important partners, Australia. While Fiji has many arrangements in place with respective partners, including memoranda of understanding and cooperation frameworks, this is Fiji's first bilateral treaty, an arrangement marking a significant milestone on Fiji's management of foreign relations and foreign diplomacy.

Australia is one of Fiji's closest economic, security and development partners. Our nations enjoy a strong relationship rooted in historical connections, shared values, mutual respect and strong people-to-people links. From our perspective, entering into a treaty arrangement with Australia is the natural next step in our bilateral relationship. It lays the foundation for an enduring partnership that will stand the test of time.

Although it is a bilateral treaty arrangement, in practical terms, it works towards greater regional integration and the operationalisation of the Ocean of Peace Declaration, supporting our endeavour to meet Fiji's sustainable development aspirations under the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent and Fiji's National Development Plan.

Our role in the development and implementation of this Treaty: The Ministry has worked closely with the Office of the Prime Minister as the lead agency, in developing the two Treaties. The Ministry was actively involved in the various rounds of negotiations to ensure that Fiji's national sovereign interests and our obligations were reflected.

As the implementation phase begins, the Ministry will continue to support the Office of the Prime Minister, which will serve as the principal agency for monitoring the implementation. Respective agencies are developing workplans and the Ministry will maintain its role in facilitating strategic dialogue between Fiji's sectoral agencies and Australian authorities on implementation priorities, such as health, education, policing, defence and security. Part and parcel of this architecture that will enable the deepening of the Vuvale Union and support effective implementation relates directly to the Ministry's mandate and responsibilities.

The Treaty establishes the Vuvale Forum under Article 6 and the Vuvale Bukmak under Article 7. These are two key provisions that relate directly to the Ministry's mandate and responsibilities.

Article 6, which is the Vuvale Forum, outlines the Vuvale Forum to be co-chaired by the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Australia and Fiji, as such invitations may also be open to other esteemed ministers as appropriate. The Vuvale Forum also opens the possibility of participation for

a broader range of stakeholders outside of Government, including traditional leaders, faith leaders and leaders in the business community. This demonstrates the all-encompassing nature of the Vuvale Union and, by extension, Fiji's relationship with Australia.

Article 7 on Vuvale Bukmak will sit, as outlined in the Article, co-chaired by respective Senior Officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade of Fiji and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Australia. It will oversee progress on workplans that fulfil our respective obligations under the Treaty.

Article 5 on Pacific Regionalism, the Vuvale Union places Pacific Regionalism at the centre of this bilateral relationship, through this Article 5. It is the key article related to the Ministry's mandate and area of responsibility. This Article is aligned with Fiji's Foreign Policy White Paper and is a practical demonstration of Fiji's Pacific Family first approach to our Foreign Policy. As Pacific Islands Forum Leaders endorsed the Ocean of Peace Declaration in the Solomon Islands in 2025, the Ministry will work closely with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat to operationalise it.

The Vuvale Union embraces the Pacific's Expanded Concept of Security under the *Boe Declaration*, which encompasses both, traditional and non-traditional security challenges, including environmental security, human security, transnational crime and cyber security. In line with this, the Ministry will work closely with the Pacific Islands Forum Members to advance Pacific-led peace and security solutions and strengthen regional integration.

On the Veitacini Treaty, the Ministry's role will be focused on ensuring that joint strategic consultations are conducted on any element relating to the Veitacini Treaty, as well as engaging diplomatically to advance the peaceful settlement of any disputes, as outlined in Article 3, in accordance with Fiji's obligations under the UN Charter.

Existing and Proposed Areas of Fiji-Australia Cooperation: Overall, the Vuvale Union will double Australia's development support to Fiji, with Australia committing over $1.5 billion. The Ministry's role is to engage with partners and build relationships that open doors for enhanced cooperation to meet our goals under Fiji's National Development Plan and the various sectoral agencies' lead implementation. A few key commitments are outlined below:

- Increased Australian support to Fiji's health infrastructure and priorities, including $158 million towards the health sector, including response to HIV, as well as supporting a new national hospital and strengthening health systems.
- Over $48 million towards supporting Fiji's economic security and economic diversification, enhancing market access and strengthening standards.

- $146 million in support of Fiji's digital transformation priorities, as well as support the upgrading of Fiji's digital infrastructure in line with Fiji's national strategy.
- Support towards building Fiji's maritime capabilities and countering transnational organised crime, allowing Fiji with the capability to proactively intercept transnational crime and illicit drug trafficking networks across the Pacific.

Those are a few key commitments under the Vuvale Union and the Veitacini Treaty and represent a significant shift in how Fiji will respond to current and emerging challenges.

The Ministry's Responsibilities Under the 10-year Work Plan: The role will be to support implementation and monitor progress, particularly through the ministerial level - Vuvale Forum, and the Senior Officials level - Vuvale Bukmak. The Ministry will, therefore, work closely with the Office of the Prime Minister and with all relevant agencies on this.

The 10-year Workplan is intended to be a dynamic living framework that builds on existing cooperation under the Vuvale Partnership. It is designed to evolve, respond to emerging priorities and remain relevant and responsive. For the first 10 years, the agreed Workplan earmarks resourcing for agreed priorities across sectors, and the Fiji Government will consider further commitment through its annual budgetary process.

Regional-Specific Elements: The Ministry will work closely with the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat to establish the Ocean of Peace Centre. The Pacific Islands Forum Leaders endorsed the establishment of this Centre as an action item under the Regional Peace and Security Action Plan at their meeting in Palau last week. This is a positive first step and the work will continue through the relevant Pacific Islands Forum processes to see it through to its eventual establishment.

Some of the Anticipated Benefits and Opportunities for Fiji: The honourable Minister for Foreign Affairs and External Trade has recently emphasised that the Vuvale Union and Veitacini Treaty is exactly about turning partnerships into opportunities and ensuring that benefits reach the people of Fiji. The benefits to Fiji cut across all sectors, including greater support to Fiji's law enforcement in tackling transnational crime and strengthening surveillance, boosting economic growth through greater support towards key initiatives such as diversification, digital transition and building up infrastructure.

Opportunities to Enhance Skills and Education: Enhanced visa settings, including the possibility of Fijians being eligible to apply for a four-month visitor visa and five-year multi-entry business visa once the Treaties enter into force, and driving ambitious climate action. These are some of the many tangible benefits and opportunities available to Fijians under this Union.

At this juncture, the key issue is effective implementation, ensuring that we move forward with all that we have set out to do. Implementing agencies will be working on their 10-year Workplans which will come into effect once the Treaty enters into force.

Another element highlighted is jurisdictional risk, particularly, when there is a visiting force. This will tie back to the respective Status of Forces arrangements we have in place with partners to ensure compliance with and alignment to Fiji's laws. With Australia, we already have a Status of Forces Agreement in place, and Fiji, through the Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs, has been working to put these arrangements in place with other partners.

We understand that there may be questions around cybersecurity, protection of information and sovereignty over data, particularly, as we work towards greater integration of Fiji and Australia's systems. While these risks exist with any partner Fiji engages with, we should prioritise developing Fiji's capabilities and capacity so that we can protect sensitive data.

Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade views these Treaties as a demonstration of Fiji exercising its sovereignty. They will work to build Fiji's economic resilience, strengthen Fiji's national security positioning, and contribute to advancing regional integration and the operationalisation of the Ocean of Peace over the next decade. We strongly recommend that the Committee support their ratification, while emphasising a wholeof-government approach to implementation. *Vinaka vakalevu*.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- We now open the floor for questions and comments from the Members of the Committee.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, thank you for your submission. I would like to make it very clear that the Committee's work is to scrutinise the Treaties that are before us. I would expect very short, brief, and precise answers.

Looking at Fiji's geographical location, we play a very strategic and critical role when it comes to geopolitics, trade and alliances, but no trade or agreement is like a free lunch. There is always a price to pay and at what cost.

I fully support all the benefits that are coming to our nation, but it is coming in terms of little fragments. I would like to highlight some figures with you. Looking at the recent coal report from Australia, $164.9 billion was pumped into the Australian economy from the coal industry and Fiji, through the Vuvale Union, is getting $1.5 billion in the next 10 years.

I would like to talk mostly about our Foreign Policy, which is 'Friends of all and enemies of none'. In my perspective, it is a foreign policy that lacks our nation to not have a spine. So

when this Treaty enters into force, does this mean we are going to silence the consequences of climate change and not be able to hold Australia accountable for the carbon emissions they are putting out? I will give you a last figure.

When you look at the export of fossil fuels, Australia ranks the second largest in terms of carbon footprint and climate change, just behind Russia. When this Treaty kicks in, does it mean that we cannot hold Australia accountable for the emissions they release?

DR. R. TAGA.- First and foremost, Fiji maintains its Foreign Policy. As you have alluded to, honourable Member, friends to all and enemies to none - being a friend to all does not mean treating all relations the same.

Within the Blue Pacific, we recognise a category of relationships that carry greater depth because of our shared history, values and principles, and shared commitment towards regionalism and the Ocean of Peace. Therefore, there are relationships that Fiji will naturally be closer to. Australia is a key bilateral partner in which we view the elevation to a treaty-level arrangement as a natural next step for the relationship.

To answer your question, Fiji is still open to question Australia as we base our partnership on Fiji's sovereignty. Sovereignty is respected in this union. Fiji will, if it permits to question Australia on its emission of carbon emissions, Fiji is free to do that.

The Treaty is open. If a government comes in and does not want to enforce the Treaty, it is free to shelve or withdraw from it. However, to answer your question, Fiji is open to question Australia also, based on its sovereignty. That is its sovereign right to question Australia if it is not honouring international laws or any other treaties that it has partnered with.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- This is a 10-year plan and when you look at Australia, UK and the US (AUKUS) Alliance, the UK and US are planning to build nuclear submarines for Australia and by 2040, Australia should be manufacturing their own. Now, we have the Vuvale, which is basically a security partnership between Fiji and Australia. One of the key concerns is the Pacific Ocean. Yes, it has been infiltrated and there is a growing influence by China in the Indo-Pacific. They are known for firing of their ballistic missiles. Is Fiji going to see hubs of nuclear submarines in this 10-year plan? My question is about the radioactive toxic waste that will be polluting our waters once this activity increases. Where are we with this? What is your viewpoint on this matter?

MR. A. LEWENIQILA.- Madam Chairperson, in relation to the question around nuclear capabilities, I think the Pacific has enforced the Rarotonga Treaty, which prohibits the entry into the Pacific of nuclear release. We have all signed up to the Treaty.

In terms of looking at those capabilities, the Pacific is in solidarity with the Rarotonga Treaty. Australia, as a member of the Pacific Island Forum, has a respect for the Rarotonga Treaty. We do not foresee that that will be an issue that will be expanded into the Pacific in terms of the expansion of nuclear capabilities into the Blue Pacific.

HON. V. LAL.- Looking at economic integration, and with an economy far larger than Fiji, my question is; will this integration be seen as Fiji consuming Australian services rather than developing its own? I can see that without deliberate measures of local capacity building; we are losing people. What do you have to say on that?

DR. R. TAGA.- Madam Chairperson, to answer that question, one of the key targets in this implementation plan is to build capacity in trade, access in improving standards, and working with our Ministry of Trade so that we also have access. According to the standards of Australia, they will work with us to improve the standards for Fiji to access the markets. It does not mean that we will be flooded with Australian products - it means that we have a fair chance and opportunity to participate in that market.

HON. V. LAL.- Through you, Madam Chairperson, as per Article 3(3)(c), Fiji will be getting about $46 million to support Fijian students who study in Australia. My question here is the enhanced mobility, which means people will be moving out. Without measure to bring skills back, it can accelerate the loss of professionals whom we send to train overseas and we want them to come back and contribute to our local economy. That mobility will cause a loss to us, so how do you see it?

MR. A. LEWENIQILA.- In response to the question, we have an existing education arrangement with DFAT in terms of students going to study in Australia. Under the Vuvale Union, the number has increased from the numbers that we have right now. However, the provisions of the scholarships that will be provided are still similar, where all recipients are required to return to Fiji as a criterion for taking up the scholarship. It is similar to what we have now for Government Officials who are required to be bonded before they depart, and those are the similar arrangements that will be in place for those particular scholarship numbers. This is to ensure that those recipients return to Fiji and continue to serve in their capacities and also in terms of growing the sectors that they have gone overseas or abroad to study in those respective fields.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- I have a question about the workplan. Where is this Workplan? When can we see this Workplan?

DR. R. TAGA.- The Vuvale Union workplan is still in draft. Because it is a 10-year workplan, this is being negotiated and will be circulated for the partners to comment and finalise the draft.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Again, back to our Foreign Policy - friends of all and enemies of none. We seem to take a very neutral stand. Yet, when it comes to Fiji's UN voting record and opposing certain anti-Israel resolutions, I see we do really take a stand. Silence is a response and not taking a side is a response. Here, we talk about climate vulnerability, loss of land and high sea tides. Here, we talk about ocean of peace, yet globally, we cannot take a stand and say, "We promote global peace as well." What are your views on us asking for peace to support us yet globally, we are not able to stand for global peace. Is this Foreign Policy a 'wrapped up' hypocrisy and what we tell the world that Fiji is about?

MR. A. LEWENIQILA.- The question touches on two elements that the honourable Member had mentioned. One is, looking at our position on UN matters and how that translates to domestic matters in looking at how we implement peace. Looking at those positions that we take at the global level of multilateral discussions and taking a position on matters of interest such as resolutions on Israel, I think when we look at those matters of friends to all and enemies to none, we certainly do undertake an objective criterion of assessment. We look at the provisions of law that we have, the practices, and how we stand on those resolutions.

On some of those matters, the Government has to take a principal position when it comes to sensitive matters, such as Israel. There are matters that we do take positions on, such as climate change. Those are thematic areas and we can take a position on those matters because they do not have a political objective in terms of the assessment criteria that we have.

We do have issues where we have an objective assessment to look at positions that we do take, but there are also thematic areas of focus, like climate change, oceans, where these are thematic and non-political discussions where we can take positions on.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- I want to talk about the proposed Ocean of Peace Centre, its funding and neutrality. How will the Ministry secure independent funding, draft the diplomatic charter, and establish the governance structure of this Centre to guarantee that it remains a genuinely neutral and Pacific-led hub rather than what some people are calling, perhaps, an instrument of Australian Foreign Policy?

DR. R. TAGA.- This Ocean of Peace Centre will be through the Pacific Islands Forum. The Centre will, therefore, be subject to Pacific Island, Forum processes, as I have alluded to, and be developed through a member follow-up process. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and

External Trade works closely with the Forum Secretariat to establish the Centre, which will oversee the effective implementation of the Ocean of Peace Declaration.

HON. V. LAL.- On that note, I can see that Article 4(3) recognises that third-party military and other security-based ongoing presence, engagements or visits could threaten or undermine the parties. How will the Ministry manage Fiji's diplomatic relations with key non-aligned bilateral partners to ensure that normal diplomatic engagements, high-level visits, or non-military security cooperation are not misconstrued as a threat to the Vuvale Union?

MR. A. LEWENIQILA.- Could I ask the honourable Member to repeat your question again, please?

HON. V. LAL.- In Article 4(3) on third-party, any third-party can come in. How will we manage diplomatic relations with key non-aligned bilateral partners as third parties? Apart from Australia and Fiji, there will be other third parties. How will we say that these third parties are not a threat, and it is not going to affect the Vuvale Union?

MR. A. LEWENIQILA.- There are two issues we will touch on in response to what the honourable Member had mentioned. One is the nature of the conflict in terms of the third-party, given that the Vuvale Union is between Australia and Fiji, in terms of the surge capacity.

Madam Chairperson, to share that, we have an existing SIGMIL capability for surge deployment in the Pacific for disaster humanitarian relief and that is based on the emergency and the request from the affected country. Looking at third-party involvement and any country that comes to engage, it is dependent on the affected country reaching out for Fiji's support in this area under this Article.

HON. V. LAL.- How will Fiji handle intense diplomatic pressure if Australia wishes to admit a State that Fiji believes could destabilise our regional balance?

DR. R. TAGA.- A key component built into this Vuvale Union and Veitacini Treaty is that of consultation. This is based on the Pacific way of engaging, so we will openly discuss with our Australian counterparts on the issue. Fiji's usual internal processes will be followed, and Fiji will base its response in terms of maintaining its sovereignty.

Sovereignty is well regarded in this Union. It is an important pillar for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for its Foreign Policy, sovereignty, prosperity and security. Based on that, the Treaty allows for consultation, which is the Pacific way of engaging with our partners.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Just a follow-up from that question, you talked about consultation on a regional aspect and the Pacific way of dialogue, but from the submittees that have come before the Committee, what I have gathered is thorough consultations were not even done with the stakeholders. I had a Director appearing before this Committee and asking me a question, when she should have been aware of what questions the Committee have in terms of scrutiny.

You talk about regional consultation and the Pacific dialogue. Why was there not enough consultations done with the stakeholders involved in protecting our borders and security and partnerships, and with the general public? Why is the public making comments that this Treaty is being rushed?

DR. R. TAGA.- This Treaty is a result of high-level consultation between the PSs and the honourable Ministers. The Permanent Secretaries had to consult with their partners in terms of bringing in their comments to inform the consultations on the Treaty. That was the responsibility of the Permanent Secretaries in terms of consulting on the Treaty. The understanding was based on that. We have gone into drafting the workplan that is informed by the leaders of the Ministries, who are stakeholders to this Treaty.

MR. A. LEWENIQILA.- Just to add on to what the Permanent Secretary has mentioned, if you note from the Treaty, it touches on the implementation of Fiji's National Development Plan in terms of priorities. There is a plan that has been consulted widely on its development by the Ministry of Finance. The comments that have been incorporated into the development of the National Development Plan informs the priorities that have been reflected from the key sector agencies represented by Permanent Secretaries, who were part of the consultation in the formulation of the Treaty.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- I have a comment on that, that I disagree. You cannot throw it under the consultation of National Development Plan. When you look at some Articles, for example, the exit and the sunset clauses, we have two years or 24 months and then there is no tribunal. In fact, it is just going to be an Executive sign-off. Some of the Articles in the Treaty, you cannot sweep it under the consultations of the National Development Plan because this is about the sovereignty of Fiji. I think a thorough work should have been done from the PS of the Office of the Prime Minister. This is the comment from me, Madam Chairperson.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- In addition to that, I was not part of the consultations at all, and you will know that, Madam PS. However, I have two questions on the consultations. How soon or how quickly were you seeing the drafts come before you? Were lawyers consulted as well when the drafts were going back and forth between Fiji and Australia? How soon were you

getting the drafts before you had to talk about it in your group of PSs? Were lawyers present during the whole part of the consultation?

DR. R. TAGA.- Yes, lawyers, through the Office of the Solicitor-General, were part of the consultation. The communication between Australia and Fiji was very open and timely in terms of the consultation and the matters that were discussed. We had around six meetings, but in all, the Office of the Solicitor-General was involved in the consultation.

HON. V. LAL.- I know there are some pre-existing agreements or treaties between Fiji, Australia and other countries. In case, if a legal or diplomatic conflict arises between this alliance and Fiji's pre-existing security, police training on maritime arrangements with non-Western partners, which agreement will the Ministry prioritise under international treaty law?

MR. A. LEWENIQILA.- As the PS has mentioned in her opening remarks, this is the first bilateral treaty with Australia. The rest are mostly agreements or cooperation agreements. Certainly, if there are any legal implications that do arise between Fiji and Australia in future agreements that have legal implications, certainly they will have to re-look at the Treaty that we have. There is a dispute settlement mechanism in the Treaty that allows for both parties to re-look at their positions on key elements.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- I will go back to the AUKUS Alliance between the US, UK and Australia and use it as an example. When the Australian Government changed, one of the issues that I picked out was, for their defence budget, some of the agreements in the alliance were supposed to be funded on top of the defence budget. So, the Government changed and it was funded within the budget. How assertive are you that Australia will commit to this $1.5 billion in the 10 years to come for Fiji?

MR. A. LEWENIQILA.- In terms of the question on how Australia will continue to support the 10-year programme that we have, the current Treaty sets the framework. It will be up to subsequent governments to look at the validity of the Treaty. As we have mentioned earlier, the dispute settlement mechanism of the Treaty allows the Government to make decisions in terms of how they see the Treaty moving forward in its implementation over the 10-year period.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Is this also a way where Fiji is indirectly building an alliance with Australia, UK and the US in terms of security, cooperation and partnership in the region, more of against China, when China is the global's biggest trading partner and no country can really survive without them? However, in terms of security, protecting our borders and agencies, is

this alliance indirectly building against China, and is Fiji being pulled into the Vuvale Union siding with greater powers?

MR. A. LEWENIQILA.- In response to the question, we do not see that this will affect our relations with China. As we have just discussed with the PS when the honourable Member was raising his question, in terms of moving forward, the Government intends to open up partnership of countries who are willing to join the alliance. That is why it is called an alliance. The government will make a decision to open it up to member countries who will want to be part of the alliance.

HON. V. LAL.- Going back to my previous question, on Article 11(1), I read it now after your answer. It states that disputes shall not be referred to any national or international tribunal. In this case, if there is a breach by either side, what diplomatic remedies does the Ministry have under international law when recourse in the International Court of Justice or other neutral tribunals is prohibited? We cannot take it to a national or an international court. How do you settle the dispute there?

MR. A. LEWENIQILA.- In response to the question, looking at the role of the International Court of Justice, I think we do not foresee that the Treaty will be extended to be covered by those international jurisdictions. This is basically a Treaty between Fiji and Australia, and the provisions in the dispute settlement are clear, that in the event either Party feels that the treaty is not fulfilling the intention that it had initially signed, the Parties have the right to withdraw from the Treaty.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- We are running out of time, but we still have a lot of questions. I will allow honourable Sharma to ask one final question, and then I will have a question as well.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- A very quick and small question I have is the pressure on the Foreign Policy. From 1970, Fiji had independence. It is now 2026 and the question is, how independent are we as a nation? Can we stand on our feet, have a spine, respond to all the global shocks, trade wars and pressures from global powers? What is the pressure on your shoulders when it comes to Foreign Policy and our bilateral and trilateral agreements?

It should not be seen as a way of Fiji receiving handouts, making us less independent because we know there is constant support, budget support and climate support. How long Fiji will be receiving this support? What needs to change in terms of governance and succession plan, which you would be the right experts to advise on? What needs to be done by Fiji to be least dependent on these nations around us and actually be the one contributing to the region and globally?

MR. A. LEWENIQILA.- I think we can attest to the changing political landscape around the world, and more so in the Pacific. Whatever happens in the Middle East affects us. Fiji strongly stands on its Foreign Policy in maintaining sovereignty and practising sovereignty. Even though it says that we are friends to all and enemies to none, but these three pillars are borders of our Foreign Policy and how we engage with others.

The political landscape in the Pacific does not isolate Fiji to be a standalone - it will work with the Pacific. So, whatever Fiji is engaging in now is not only for itself, but also for the Pacific, because with the Ocean of Peace Declaration, regionalism comes into practice, so Fiji will guard its sovereignty. That is no question at all - it will guard its sovereignty. However, as we know now, we will uphold whatever laws will ensure that we have. Fiji maintains its sovereignty and makes its decisions for Fiji and for those that depend on Fiji.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- I wanted to ask about regional vulnerability, and you talked about what is happening in the region. Article 15(1) states that a party will cease to be a party one year after the date of its written notice of withdrawal.

We have seen what has happened in the Solomon Islands. In the event of a sudden change of government or shift in strategic priorities in the Australian Government, how will the Ministry be able to rapidly rebuild Fiji's regional diplomatic alliances, security partnerships, and maritime surveillance arrangements during the brief 12-month transition window, if we had something happen like what recently happened in the Solomon Islands?

DR. R. TAGA.- As we have alluded to, the Treaty will be through the Pacific Islands Forum under the processes of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. Fiji can use that platform to ensure that our sovereignty is maintained, and we guard the sovereignty of Fiji.

We are working as a region. As you have mentioned, whatever happens in other regions affects us, as we can attest to, all of us. Through the Pacific Islands Forum, there is an avenue for processes through that, and they have to consult and work through the issues and the risks that will impact us.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you very much, Madam PS and Mr. Leweniqila, for your time this morning. I hope that you will allow us to put our thoughts together. As I have said, we ran out of time very quickly. We still have a lot of questions, and we hope that you will accept some of the questions that we may send to you via email.

The Committee meeting adjourned at 11.05 a.m.

The Committee resumed at 11.14 a.m.

Submittee/ Interviewee: **External Trade Unit, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade**

In Attendance:

(1) Dr. Raijieli Taga - Permanent Secretary
(2) Ms. Deepika Singh - Director External Trade
(3) Ms. Madhu Chand - Principal Trade Economist

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Welcome back, honourable Members, PS, Dr. Raijeli Taga, members of the media and members of the public, to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence's scrutiny of the Ocean of Peace Alliance, also known as the Veitacini Treaty, and the FijiAustralia-Vuvale Union.

(Introduction of Officials from the External Trade Unit)

We welcome you, ladies, and we understand that Director, External Trade, Ms. Deepika Singh, has lost her voice, so we will be hearing from Ms. Chand for most of this question time. If you have any opening remarks, Ms. Chand, you may carry on, otherwise, we will go straight into our questions.

MS. M. CHAND.- We can go straight to the questions, Madam Chairperson.

HON. V. LAL.- I will start with the questions and just going straight into it. What specific external trade policies will the Ministry deploy to ensure that deepening bilateral trade with Australia does not disadvantage Fiji's trade relations with other Pacific Island Countries?

MS. D. SINGH.- I will attempt to answer that question with this voice. Thank you so much for the question. If you see the Vuvale Union, there are references to fair rules-based trading system. It is a very broad reference to rules-based trading system, so a lot can be done under trade as part of the Vuvale Union.

Again, the Vuvale Union is not a trade agreement itself, but there are references to rulesbased trade system and to supply chain resilience. I have seen the Workplan that is currently in draft form, and it incorporates whatever existing work programmes or work streams we are undertaking currently, such as the assessment of the base supplies and whether or not Fiji should accede to it.

Apart from that, there is also a lot of cross-cutting elements that does intersect with trade. I have seen continuous work and references to that in the Workplan itself, and some of it is in relation to standards. For example, we have had assistance from Standards Australia, not us as the Ministry, but the Ministry of Commerce and Business Development. We are part of that discussion and work programme in terms of updating Fiji's regulatory standards, aligning it to international best practices, and assistance on the regulatory or legal alignment when it comes to trade standards in metrology, et cetera.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- I have a question, and this is in relation to Article 4(2)(b) – the vetting of infrastructure technology in the Vuvale Union. How will External Trade Unit handle, if any, diplomatic friction or trade relation or retaliation from major third-party trading partners if Fiji must exclude their technology providers from local infrastructure tenders to satisfy this Treaty requirements?

MS. D. SINGH.- Article 4(2)(b), as you have rightfully pointed out, is with respect to how the parties, in this case, Fiji and Australia, will engage any third parties in our own critical infrastructure, technology-related sectors. I see that it intersects with our Investment Policy and very closely aligned with Trade Policy as well. The way I am reading this particular Article, it talks about parties engaging and ensuring that whichever third party we engage with, does not compromise our national interest, security or our sovereignty in terms of these particular areas. These can be considered strategic investments.

I think what needs to be done in terms of any investment that happens which constitutes a third party in respect to this provision is that it needs to go through its own due diligence, its risk assessment and its own process. However, I do not see how it would limit us from engaging with third parties. Of course, there might be certain concerns that could be raised as part of some critical infrastructure investments from third parties. However, again, these mechanisms of consultation and discussions can be undertaken as part of any concern that might be brought in as part of the investments.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- We have a market that prefers price over quality, but that should not reflect with our bilateral partners and multilateral partners. The point I am trying to make is, Fiji must not be seen as a dumping ground of items wrapped in the name of support, aid and trade, which we have seen where some of the donated items are rusting in corners of premises and we do not know how to dispose that off.

When you look at the obligations and benefits of PACER Plus, which the Fijian Government is considering, how will this interact with this Vuvale Union and the trade benefits for Fiji?

MS. D. SINGH.- To answer that question, the Vuvale Union has no direct implication on any trade agreement, future or present, that we will be negotiating or will be our parties to, in the

sense that this does not determine what is agreed into a free trade agreement. To answer your question in terms of the link between the Vuvale Union, for instance, and PACER Plus, as Madam PS has alluded to earlier, there is a Workplan in place in terms of what activities we will be undertaking for the 10 years, and part of that Workplan is consideration of the PACER Plus Agreement.

It does not over-impose and say Fiji should sign - there is no binding commitment in signing the Treaty, it is consideration. We are using that as an avenue or mechanism to get resources and expertise to consider the various provisions of agreements such as PACER Plus, so that our stakeholders, agencies, business community, traders, private sector and investors are able to understand the different chapters of commitments that we will be undertaking, if we do make a decision to accede.

It has its own separate track in terms of consultations, tabling it to DSC and Cabinet. It is a standalone agreement that sits outside the provision of this. It could form part of the Workplan, but the Workplan would not be in a manner that is binding on us or anything that we would commit as part of the Workplan that we will do certain things.

Also, to answer your question in terms of the price of over quality, that is also a very important point that you have mentioned. There is an ongoing concerted effort, as part of the broader trade facilitation activity that we are already undertaking with support from partners like Australia, New Zealand, the European Union and other couple of partners, that is helping us strengthen our border provisions in terms of allowing certain goods into the country. Based on what we are importing and what commodity it is, there is a different regulatory oversight in accordance with the laws and regulations of the country.

Apart from the Customs intervention, there is intervention, for example, from Biosecurity Authority of Fiji, Ministry of Health and Medical Services, depending on what commodity is being imported. There is very concerted and targeted trade facilitation reforms that are currently being undertaken that is resource intensive and very costly. So, we need partners, like Australia, to help us from the resourcing angle and technical expertise angle in implementing certain reforms and be mindful that those reforms do not have to replicate what Australia and New Zealand are doing in their own countries. It needs to be domesticated in our own context so that it makes sense for us and that is what we do.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- If I heard you correctly, you said that this Treaty has no obligations around trade. My rest of the questions are based on trade.

I will go on to your answer when you mentioned the Workplan. In the Workplan now, would you consider balance? Fiji imports more than we export to Australia. Is there a workplan now in place to mitigate this imbalance, or increase exports? What does it mean for our local entrepreneurs? There are two parts of the question. When the Committee met the New

Zealand delegation, they want to take our trade to, at least, $2 billion by 2030, which is good for our local consumers and entrepreneurs. Does your Workplan have something similar?

MS. D. SINGH.- The Workplan is still in development. I have just seen the work programme now, but we will, obviously, be part of shaping how the work programme is actually developed. I do see references, for example, to economic diversification, and I feel like that is very important when talk about trade agreements or trade in general.

One of the important elements that needs to be complemented with any trade regime is how we develop our own industry so that we are able to optimise any trade agreements that we sign up to or we start negotiating. There is reference to economic security and economic diversification and there is, I think, a reference to some amount of funding that is being allocated.

The onus is on us in terms of how we utilise the funding that is being provided. Where exactly does that funding go? For example, if we get the funding and we use it in doing certain studies or feasibilities, et cetera, then, obviously, the benefits translated would be in the very longer term or in the medium term. Again, to the point that whatever resources we get, it is very important that whenever work programmes of this kind is being developed, the funding actually addresses the immediate challenges or issues that we are facing and has a lifespan that is able to be sustainably managed or complemented in future.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Is Fiji and Australia going to relook at that tariff formula under this Vuvale Union?

MS. D. SINGH.- As I mentioned, the Vuvale Union cannot have a standalone tariff commitment and that is why I am saying that this is not a trade agreement. The Vuvale Union has a very broad reference to fair rules-based system, which we all want, because this is to negate any unpredictable trade partner actions such as what we have faced recently from certain trade partners. That is a commitment that is in the best interest of everyone.

In terms of how we implement the fair rules-based system commitment under the Vuvale, it would be based on our future discussion. For example, we could decide we will do a bilateral in order to implement that type of provision. Trade agreements are very broad; they are not just tariffs. They are on sanitary, phytosanitary measures. There are technical amendments, technical barriers to trade, they are related, for example, to investments, movement of natural persons, so it is very comprehensive. So, a Treaty of this nature is seen just as a foundational, that there is a commitment between parties to have a look at such commitments in terms of how we make fair trade, fair and predictable.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- So the $1.5 billion in 10 years, can you elaborate on this aspect? Is it that Fiji needs to get consultants from Australia only and have Australian-made products come into Fiji when building our cybersecurity and any capacity infrastructure in going forward? The aid is given by Australia only to be allowed to get consultants and purchase everything from Australia, is it so?

MS. D. SINGH.- I am not sure about the exact amount of the commitment, but usually that is not how the requirement from any partner country is in terms of utilising only their country consultants or technology or something like that. It needs to be based on the country's own needs and our own assessment. I am pretty sure we will not agree to such requirements in the first place.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you, Ms. Singh. I wanted to talk about Article 3(3)(b), which says, and I quote:

> "The Parties commit to deepen their economic and human development partnership by enhancing:
>
> (b) the transition to a digital economy."

We understand that the public funding package includes $146.3 million for digital transformation. This is not a question; it is just a comment. I hope that while working through the Workplan, that all stakeholders will consider how much of that spend will be delivered by and retained within Fiji firms and whether the infrastructure it funds, including data centres, will be Fijian-owned and Fijian-operated. I think that has been the lining of honourable Sharma's question. How much of that money actually stays here and helps with capacity building for ourselves?

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Do you feel that the trade aspect should have been included in this Treaty, and it has been missed out?

MS. D. SINGH.- I think it is usually good for such treaties to have a very general reference to trade - any form of a trade arrangement or agreement, because trade agreements are very broad. It makes sense for it to have a separate track whereby there is a cross-section of relevant stakeholders involved in the negotiation.

One of the usual chapters of trade agreements are also digital trade. We include Ministry of Communications experts on such chapters. It is very broad. It gives me a relief that there is

no binding commitment in terms of trade, because trade agreements itself is very commercial in nature and needs to be assessed from a different track and very comprehensive. This gives us certain room to manoeuvre in terms of the future trade considerations and decisions. This is not binding us or placing us into a particular segment to say, "We need to do this." This is better than having something really spelled out specifically for us.

HON. V. LAL.- The way I read it, data centres may be built and owned abroad, Government systems may be supplied and maintained by foreign vendors on terms Fiji cannot fully alter, and the digital span may flow largely to Australian contractors. The result would be a modernised but dependent Fiji, so dependency addressed as development. This is how I see it. What is your comment on that?

MS. D. SINGH.- I am not sure if I am qualified to answer on the digital infrastructure aspect, but I see that there is no limitation for us to only procure or engage services from Australians. It could be based on our own assessments from any other country as well, and that is something, I believe, we are even doing in the current context. Most of our digital infrastructure needs are supported by some of the external countries whereby, perhaps, technical support mechanisms are domestic. There is a recognition that we do not have the expertise maybe or in terms of developing certain digital infrastructure or even in terms of maintenance.

I think based on our assessment; it should not be a blanket analytical judgment that we need to get this from only one particular country based on what services or hardware we are trying to obtain. I think it would be based on that particular assessment based on its own context.

HON. V. LAL.- Does this Treaty not bind us that we cannot go outside?

MS. D. SINGH.- I do not see any references to specifically obtaining digital transformationrelated tools or infrastructure only from Australia. What it says is that the parties commit to deepen the economic and human development partnership by enhancing the transition to digital economy. Perhaps, it is how we read and interpret the legal terminology. It does not bind us to say that the digital transformation needs to happen only with the help of Australia. I think it is just the context also.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- I thank our submittees this morning. I see there are no more questions from the Committee.

I want to thank you for your time, Director Trade, Ms Madhu Chand, PS and Mr. Leweniqila. On that note, we want to thank you for your time today and we hope that we can write to you,

if we have any more burning questions that come up during our deliberations. I now close the meeting.

The Committee meeting adjourned at 11.37 a.m.

Ministry of Health

MEMORANDUM

From: Permanent Secretary for Health and Medical Services — Phone: 3306177

To.. Secretariat Parliament of the Republic of Fiji — Date: 10/09/2026

Subject: Oral presentation on the Fiji- Australia Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty) — File Ref: 1/1/16

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1 I refer to your correspondence, Parl 7/05, dated 3 September 2026, inviting the Ministry to provide a public submission to the Committee on the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty).

2. The Ministry of Health and Medical Services respectfully submits the following submission for oral presentation.

Madam Chairlady and Honourable Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting the Ministry of Health and Medical Services to contribute to your review of the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance, also known as the Veitacini Treaty. I, Dr Luisa Cikamatana, the Acting Permanent Secretary for Health and Medical Services, appear on behalf ofthe Ministry, together with senior officials who can assist the Committee on technical and implementation matters. I will now ask if they can introduce themselves to the Committee, Madam Chairlady.

The Ministry supports the health objectives associated with these agreements. Our central message is that the treaty framework offers Fiji a significant opportunity to strengthen health security, respond to the HIV epidemic, develop our workforce and modemise essential infrastructure. To realise that opportunity, implementation is Fiji-led, aligned with our national health priorities, transparently financed and measured against outcomes for our people.

Why health belongs in this treaty framework

The Vuvale Union adopts the Pacific's expanded understanding of security. Health, climate, economic resilience, social stability and human dignity are connected. A health system that cannot prevent disease, maintain essential services during disasters or reach people in all divisions is not only a service-delivery concern; it affects national resilience and economic security.

Article 3 is the main foundation for the Ministry's involvement. It places inclusive development and human dignity at the centre of lasting peace and recognises quality healthcare, resilient infrastructure, fiscal stability and gender equality as foundations of

economic security. Article 4 is also relevant because it addresses climate security, transnational crime, critical infrastructure, cyberspace and integrated border protection. These provisions connect directly to epidemic response, drug-related harm, climateresilient facilities, health data security, border health and emergency readiness.

Fiji's health context

The urgency is clear. Fiji's official 2025 HIV report recorded 2,016 new diagnoses, the highest annual number reported, and a 27 percent increase from 2024. It also recorded 1 17 HIV-related deaths. Among the people newly diagnosed in 2025, 41.9 percent were not enrolled in care at the time reflected in the report. These figures underline the need to expand prevention and testing, but also to link people rapidly to treatment, retain them in care and reduce stigma.

At the same time, non-communicable diseases continue to impose a very high burden. The World Bank's 2024 health sector review reported that NCDs account for about 80 percent of deaths in Fiji and identified overstretched primary care, constrained hospitals and an unevenly distributed workforce. Our response therefore cannot be built around one disease or one building. It must strengthen the whole system.

Ministry role and work plan

The Ministry prepared a health workplan during negotiations in the aligned to the three main work streams.

First is the support to intensify Fiji's HIV response. The proposed activities include community-based prevention, awareness and stigma reduction; strengthened public-health research and data capability; community engagement; mobile health education; risk communication; and a larger health-promotion workforce.

Second is the Vuvale Health Partnership with Australian hospitals and agencies. Proposed activities include institutional twinning, specialist outreach, mentoring, telehealth, management support, public-health research and exchange programmes. Our intention should be lasting transfer of capability to Fijian institutions, not a sequence of disconnected visits.

Third is the hospital investment. The workplan identifies support for a new national hospital, CWM Hospital and St Giles Hospital. Infrastructure can transform care, but only when it is tied to clinical service planning, a staffed workforce, functioning equipment, utilities, digital systems, infection prevention and long-term maintenance.

Financial and implementation clarity

The funding will require financial reconciliation, as we progress, as will be described in different layers of the package, but the relationship between them will remain clear.

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The health programme will operate through one consolidated implementation plan under Ministry leadership. We will use the existing mechanism of Fiji Health Program as well as Fiji's planning, budgeting, audit and reporting systems wherever appropriate.

Governance law and safeguards

The Vuvale Union establishes the ministerial Vuvale Forum and the senior-officials Vuvale Bukmak. The Ministry will participate in these forums and whenever health matters are devices considered. Article 11 also permits implementing arrangements. We will align the health implementing arrangement to those of the Union and Alliance's authority, finance, governance, monitoring, data protection, workforce responsibilities, procurement and dispute escalation.

We have our domestic legal and regulatory mechanisms that cater for clinical and public health practice, digital, health information including data, research, biological samples, medicines and medical devices, emergency powers or major capital procurement.

Should our existing law is insufficient even in regulation, administrative direction or legislative amendment that may be required, will be requested through our normal channel of communication to the Solicitor General's Office.

Safeguards are equally important. Health decisions will remain under appropriate civilian health authority. Patient confidentiality and data sovereignty will be protected. People living with HIV and affected communities will participate meaningfully in programme design. Rural, maritime and underserved communities will benefit.

The Veitacini Treaty

The Veitacini Treaty is primarily a mutual defence treaty. It does not create a separate health funding programme itself. For the Ministry, its practical relevance will support medical readiness, emergency coordination, border health, medical evacuation, masscasualty response and continuity of essential services. Any such cooperation will be proportionate to the Ministry's mandate, governed by domestic law and coordinated through clear civilian and inter-agency arrangements.

Outcomes and accountability

Over the ten years, success will be judged by measurable improvements, not only by money spent or activities completed. For HIV, the indicators will include linkage to treatment, retention, viral suppression, prevention of mother-to-child transmission, mortality and equitable access. For the workforce, we will measure vacancies, retention, specialist capability, rural distribution and the number of Fijian trainers developed. For facilities, we will measure service readiness, equipment uptime, maintenance, accessibility and climate resilience.

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The monitoring and evaluation will be integrated into the Ministry's processes with annual results, an independent mid-term evaluation and be adjusted when evidence shows that an activity is not producing the expected benefit.

Closing

Madam Chairlady, the Ministry considers the Vuvale Union a valuable long-term framework for strengthening Fiji's health system and our partnership with Australia. The strongest implementation will be one that reinforces Fiji's sovereignty and institutions, responds urgently to HIV, invests in people as well as buildings, protects confidentiality and equity, and leaves Fiji with sustainable capability at the end of the decade.

We respectfully recommend that the objectives are supported optimistically and on behalf of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, I sincerely thank you Madam Chairlady and the committee.

We now welcome the Committee's questions.

Sincerely,



Dr. Luisa Cikamatana Rauto

Acting Permanent Secretary

[VERBATIM REPORT]

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

UNION/TREATY

(1) FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION
(2) OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE (VEITACINI TREATY)

ENTITY: Ministry of Health and Medical Services
VENUE: Big Committee Room (East Wing)
DATE: Fri day, 10th September, 2026

VERBATIM REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE HELD AT THE COMMITTEE ROOM (EAST WING), PARLIAMENT PRECINCTS, GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, ON THURSDAY, 10TH SEPTEMBER, 2026, AT 3.18 P.M.

Present:

Hon. R.R. Sharma - Deputy Chairperson

Hon. V. Lal - Member

Hon. P.K. Ravunawa - Member

Hon. S. Kumar - Alternate Member

Apologies:

Hon. L.S. Qereqeretabua - Chairperson

Hon. T.R. Matasawalevu - Member

Hon. I. Tuiwailevu - Member

Interviewee/Submittee: Ministry of Health and Medical Services

In Attendance:

(1) Dr. Luisa Cikamatana - Acting Permanent Secretary
(2) Dr. Mike Kama - Acting Deputy Secretary, Hospital Services
(3) Mr. Jiosefa Draunidalo - Head of Human Resources
(4) Ms. Atirutakenimatag Kaure - Manager, Mission, Donation and Referral

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DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Honourable Members, Officials from the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, members of the media and the public, dear viewers, ladies and gentlemen; a very good morning to you all. It is my pleasure to welcome everyone present in this room, as well as those joining us via live broadcast.

At the outset, for information purposes, I wish to advise that pursuant to the Standing Orders of Parliament, specifically Standing Order 111, all Committee meetings are open to the public and media. Accordingly, this submission meeting is open to the public and members of the media. However, should there be any sensitive information relating to this submission that cannot be disclosed publicly, such information may be provided to the Committee either in writing or in a closed session. This will only be permitted in limited circumstances, including matters relating to national security, third-party confidential information, personnel or human resource matters and Committee deliberation and development of Committee's recommendations and reports.

I wish to remind honourable Members and Submittees that all comments and questions should be directed through the Chair. For viewers following this meeting live on *Facebook,* questions may be submitted via the comments section. Please, note that only relevant questions will be considered by the Committee. Members of the Committee may interject during the submission or, alternatively, questions will be raised at the conclusion of this presentation.

I further remind all present that this is a Parliamentary proceeding. All information provided is protected under the Parliamentary Powers and Privileges Act and Standing Orders of Parliament. Slander or libel of any kind will not be condoned and all information presented to the Committee shall be factual.

In terms of meeting protocols, movement within the meeting room should be kept to a minimum. The usage of mobile phones is discouraged, and all mobile phones should be placed on silent mode for the duration of the meeting.

I will now introduce the Members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence.

(Introduction of Committee Members and Secretariat)

Today, the Committee will receive an in-person joint submission from the Ministry of Health and Medical Services in relation to the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance or Veitacini Treaty, currently before the Committee. Now, I invite the representatives from the Ministry to introduce themselves and proceed with their submission.

You have 15 minutes for your opening statement and then we will have questions from the Committee Members. Kindly note that the microphone should be turned on before you speak and turned off immediately after you speak, to avoid any disruption to the live submission.

(Introduction Ministry of Health and Medical Services Officials)

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- Deputy Chairperson, thank you for inviting the Ministry of Health and Medical Services to contribute to your review of the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance, the Veitacini Treaty. I, as the Acting Permanent Secretary for Health and Medical Services, appear on behalf of the Ministry, together with my fellow Senior Officials, who will be able to assist the Committee understand more on technical and implementation matters.

The Ministry supports the health objectives associated with these Agreements. Our central message is that the Treaty offers Fiji a significant opportunity to strengthen health security, respond to the HIV epidemic, develop our workforce and modernise essential infrastructure.

To realise that opportunity, implementation is collegial and Fiji-led, aligned with our national health priorities, transparently financed, and measured against outcomes for our people.

Why Health Gelongs to this Treaty Framework: The Vuvale Union adopts the Pacific's expanded understanding of security, health, climate change, economic resilience, social stability and human dignity which are connected. A health system that cannot prevent disease, maintain essential services during disasters or reach people in all Divisions, is not only a service delivery concern, but it affects national resilience and economic security.

Article 3 of the Union is the main foundation for the Ministry's involvement. It places inclusive development and human dignity at the centre of lasting peace, and recognises quality healthcare, resilient infrastructure, fiscal stability and gender equality as foundations of economic security.

Article 4 of the Union is also relevant because it addresses climate security, transnational crime, critical infrastructure, cyberspace and integrated border protection. These provisions connect directly to epidemic response, drug-related harm, climate-resilient facilities, health doctor security, border health and emergency readiness.

In Fiji's health context, the urgency is clear. Fiji's Official 2025 HIV Report recorded 2,016 new diagnoses, the highest annual number reported and a 27 percent increase from 2024. It also recorded 117 HIV-related deaths. Among the people newly diagnosed in 2025, 41.9 percent were not enrolled in care at the time reflected in the report. These figures underline the need to expand prevention and testing, but also to link people rapidly to treatment, retain them in care and reduce stigma.

At the same time, Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) continue to impose a very high burden. The World Bank's 2024 Health Sector Review reported that NCDs account for about 80 percent of deaths in Fiji and identified overstretched primary care, constrained hospitals and an unevenly distributed workforce. Our response, therefore, cannot be built around one disease or one building - it must strengthen the whole system.

Ministry's Role and Workplan: The Ministry prepared a Health Workplan during negotiations, aligned to the three main work streams specific for health:

(1) Support to Intensify Fiji's HIV Response

The proposed activities include community-based prevention, awareness and stigma reduction, strengthened public health research and data capability, community engagement, mobile health education, risk communication and a larger health promotion workforce.

(2) Vuvale Health Partnership with Australian Hospitals and Agencies

Proposed activities include institutional training, specialised outreach, mentoring telehealth, management support, public health research and exchange programmes. Our intention should be lasting transfer of capability to Fijian institutions, not a sequence of disconnected visits.

(3) Hospital Investment

The Workplan identifies support for a new national hospital, CWM Hospital, and St. Giles Hospital. Infrastructure can transform care, but only when it is tied to clinical service planning, a staffed workforce, functioning equipment, utilities, digital systems, infection prevention and long-term maintenance.

Looking at financial and implementation clarity, the funding will require financial stewardship and as we progress, described in different layers of the package, but the relationship between them will remain clear. The Health Workplan will operate through one consolidated implementation plan under the Ministry leadership. We will use the existing mechanism of Fiji Health Programme, as well as Fiji's planning, budgeting, auditing and reporting systems wherever appropriate.

Governance, Law and Safeguards: The Vuvale Union establishes the Ministerial Vuvale Forum and the Senior Officials Vuvale Bukmak. The Ministry will participate in these forums and whenever health matters are conceded.

Under Article 11 of the Union, it also permits implementing arrangements. We will align the health implementing arrangement to those of the Union and the Alliance's authority –

finance, governance, monitoring, data protection, workforce responsibilities, procurement and dispute escalation.

We have our domestic legal and regulatory mechanisms that cater for clinical and public health practice, digital health information including data and research, biological samples, medicine and medical devices, emergency powers or major capital procurement. Should our existing law be insufficient, even in regulation, administrative direction or legislative amendment that may be required, will be requested through our normal channel of communication to the Office of the Solicitor-General.

Safeguards are equally important. Health decisions will remain under appropriate civilian health authority. Patient confidentiality and data sovereignty will be protected. People living with HIV and affected communities will participate meaningfully in programme design. Rural, maritime and underserved communities will benefit.

The Veitacini Treaty is primarily a mutual defence Treaty. It does not create a separate health funding programme itself. For the Ministry, its practical relevance will support medical readiness, emergency coordination, border health, medical evacuation, mass casualty response and continuity of essential services. Any such cooperation will be proportionate to the Ministry's mandate, governed by domestic law and coordinated through clear civilian and inter-agency arrangements in the spirit of the Treaty.

Outcomes and Accountability: Over the 10 years, success will be judged by measurable improvements and not only by money spent or activities completed -

- For HIV, the indicators will include linkage to treatment, retention, viral suppression, prevention of mother-to-child transmission, mortality and equitable access.
- For the workforce, we will measure vacancies, retention, specialist capability, rural distribution and the number of Fijian trainers developed.
- For facilities, we will measure service readiness, equipment uptime, maintenance, accessibility and climate resilience.

The monitoring and evaluation will be integrated into the Ministry's processes with annual results, the Union's mid-term evaluation and be adjusted when evidence shows that an activity is not producing the expected benefit.

In closing, the Ministry considers the Vuvale Union a valuable, long-term framework for strengthening Fiji's health system and our partnership with Australia. The strongest implementation will be one that reinforces Fiji's sovereignty and institutions, responds

urgently to HIV, invests in people as well as buildings, protects confidentiality and equity and leaves Fiji with sustainable capability at the end of the decade.

We respectfully recommend that the objectives are supported optimistically. So, on behalf of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, I sincerely thank you, Sir, as Deputy Chairperson, and the Committee. *Vinaka vakalevu*.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you. Honourable Members, I open the floor for questions.

HON. V. LAL.- Thank you, Acting PS, for your presentation. I can see that you have mostly talked about how this Treaty is going to uplift Fiji's health workforce, hospital and targeted measures to control the HIV epidemic. I will take you through to Article 3(4), which talks about the reliable supply chains. By agreeing to this Treaty, will this not prevent Fiji from sourcing more affordable generic drugs from competitive markets, apart from Australia?

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- As I had mentioned, our Workplan will be incorporated with our processes. It is linked to our plan and is not a different plan. The funding will strengthen our system. It will look at where our gaps are with our medical supplies. That is the strength of the partnership.

For 30 years, we have been having our relationship with the Australian Government through the bilateral funding, and we have grown over the years, and we have had good relationships. We work better now through the Vuvale partnership, but now that it is going to be elevated to a union, that is even stronger. It is really looking at our health system and trying to see where we can improve.

It is not a new plan altogether; it is under our one plan.

HON. V. LAL.- Adding to that, we always look at cheaper markets like India, China, et cetera. In Article 4(3), I can see it talks about undermining collective security. If Fiji secures some other source, apart from Australia, will not Australia legally challenge these arrangements as a threat to collective security?

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- I guess we have to be clear. We have our domestic funding. That is where we have our processes. We go through the tender process, and we have quality controls. We determine because of the quality of medicine or medical devices that we will procure, so this is added on to strengthen our services and our processes.

The Workplan will come about should we have any issues that we think we will look towards the Union for assistance, and that will happen as whatever we discover. It is more like a relationship. I envisage that should we need to go outside, it does not mean that Australia will have to produce or we buy from them. I see it as a relationship where we have *talanoa* and we determine what is best for Fiji. We, as leaders in the Ministry, will have to put that at the negotiation table.

HON. V. LAL.- What I can see under this Treaty, it requires us to upgrade our hospitals and clinical facilities. How is this going to affect our local health budget?

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- You would have now have the information that we are having a master plan for CWM Hospital. So, in that master plan, we will determine what is the best site and what is it that we want as the new national referral hospital. In that *talanoa* session, in that assessment, we are also involving the bilateral team that is looking after the bilateral assistance for us.

We are already in discussion. I do not see it as a problem because then, we are at the negotiation table. We are transparent. We should know what the plan is and it is nothing new that comes on. It is continuing our plan and strengthening it so that we also have some assistance with finances and technical support. I do not see that as a conflict.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- This is a Treaty now, before it was an agreement, but Australia has been Fiji's largest and longest bilateral partner. What is the percentage or level of dependency for healthcare on foreign aid, knowing that we, as Fiji, cannot afford to have a healthcare system that we would want to have? What are the figures? What is the level of dependency? Is this $1.5 billion enough? I do not know what fraction the healthcare would receive. Where are we as a nation? I think that is something, even for the public, to know.

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- Our budget stands at close to $477 million per year. Currently, with the bilateral, it is at $6 million per year, but it can go on to $10 million. It is more of just helping us. It does not take over our budget, nor reliance. Also, their plan works with us. It is strengthening and complementing our plans. I guess we have gaps as well. We need to strengthen our system and we need better planning. That is why we have only one plan, one budget, and one monitoring and evaluation, so that any donor or partner comes in and wants to help the Ministry, it aligns to that plan, one budget and one monitoring and evaluation.

We are starting with our new National Strategic Plan. This year, we are working on strengthening our health system. Hopefully, as we strengthen and we know our processes, we

collect all our data and we know how much we are spending, we will also know what our gap is and then we will be ready to say, "This is our gap. If you want to help us, this is where you come in and help us with."

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Going back to 2025, when Australia had announced $14.5 million to be funded in two phases, what I see is the failure of the Ministry in prioritising which areas need urgent attention or funding. Yesterday, I was at CWM Hospital - ED Ward where one of our colleagues is admitted. I happen to be there, and it was packed. Why is the priority not given to the expansion of the ED Ward, at least? People are sick, sitting on benches, yet we are fixing the washrooms and the sewer. I know years of neglect, I admit, absolutely. The CWM Hospital does not look like that in just a year or two. How do you prioritise?

This is the two-phase budget. Now, we are looking at a 10-year plan. You said you have a Master Plan, and you have finance. How are you going to prioritise this? There is a succession plan. Governments will come and go. The Treaty is here, but the whole idea is the continuity.

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- The $14 million is part of the development of the Master Plan, so it had different components to it. First, was the Clinical Service Plan for CWM Hospital. Then they came up with the Priority Infrastructure Plan that identified what all priority infrastructure upgrades were needed. With the money that they had, they had to then use that for the prioritisation of whatever they needed to undertake.

It is very expensive to change that roof. They have a list of priority areas that they are working on now. The next one was supposed to be the feasibility study and the business case for the new Referral Hospital. That is where we are up to now, the fourth and the fifth stages of development of that Master Plan.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- If there is a wheelchair or doorknob that is allocated to the Ministry of Health, who monitors the stock? Who monitors that this wheelchair is not suitable to be used anymore?

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- Each facility has their own executive committee, so they are responsible. In the Act, the officer in charge is responsible for the upkeep and the overall management of the facility. There should be processes where each department should be looking at all of that. The health system is not just about equipment, but a whole system.

Under WHO, we have six building blocks that we look at - governance and leadership, services, human resources that goes in providing that service, the supplies that they need to carry out the service, the information that they gather because they are running a service, and

the finance that should enable the service to continue. Each department should be able to carry out all of those to see what is working and what is not, and they are supposed to have processes where they report, and it gets escalated.

When the system is weak, this is where you find the gaps because whoever is in charge of the department or the unit, is responsible. Sometimes, it is either communication problem or leadership problem. There are many factors. We have a clinical governance that looks at all patients' safety and picks up from the report – an unusual occurrence report – where the staff reports that there is always a risk or a hazard and they need to solve it. That is the system in place.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- PS, once this Treaty is into effect, are you certain or the whole idea of the outcome that Fiji's healthcare standards will be up to par as the Australian healthcare standards?

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- We can only dream, but we have processes in place for improvement. This is where monitoring and evaluation is very important, so as we go along, you will tell us whether we are going in the right direction, and if we are not, we have to change. It all comes back, again, to better planning and the monitoring and evaluation.

HON. V. LAL.- Just one more from me, Deputy Chairperson. Acting PS, you have talked about the integration of medical databases. What safeguards are there to prevent Fijian citizens' private medical and genomic data from being exposed to foreign cyber surveillance or unauthorised external access?

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- We are part of the ICT that also looks after our cyber security, so we are not alone. However, we also have our processes in place where we also look at our cyber security. Now, we are having training run by the platform, which is where we have the bilateral assistance partnership, so it is helping us to look at our system. I know it might take time.

Technology is an enabler for us, and with us looking at all those, we have a Digital Health Strategic Plan as well. We are looking at improving our infrastructure for digital health. All of these are the different components, and we are working on it. We have in place as well our server and our data is also kept off site.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- PS, there is a big question about Fiji's sovereignty in terms of what honourable Lal has said. There are superpowers known to distribute electronic devices because they are in the plan for data farming. How do you see your Ministry not being a

victim of this kind of concept that some of the global powers have? I will not name them, but it is quite evident.

I will give you one example. We may procure electronic devices from Australia and New Zealand, but they are very expensive, but if we get the same thing made in China, they are way cheaper. What are your thoughts on that?

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- For us to procure our digital devices, we work on the Government processes where we have the tender process and then through tender, they will determine all risks in procurement. We do not purchase outside of that tender and its processes.

They also involve ICT. Normally, for all electronics or any gadgets or any IT components, it is through ITC. They have the experts. If we are not having confidence in them, that is where we know the risk is higher. Whatever we purchase, we assume that we are guaranteed a lower risk of getting into all of that and any cybercrime.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Let us just say, during five years going ahead with this Treaty, Australia and Fiji have their differences. What plan does the Ministry have to mitigate or take on whatever has been left off to build, secure and procure Fiji's healthcare? What is the mitigation strategy for your Ministry?

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- Because we are using our government processes, I guess that we are in a safe space. Should there be a breakdown, which I do not envisage, because it is embedded in the Treaty itself that we have collaboration and partnership, we *talanoa* and there is negotiation in a peaceful manner, so it is all covered in that.

If we look at relationships, we try and ensure that it works. There is trust and honesty in order for it to flourish and continue. I see that if it does happen, we will just have to look at ways of mitigating and seeing that we are safe because we are here to protect the health of the nation.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- PS, when it comes to *talanoa*, it is unfortunate that when the PS of the Office of the Prime Minister said that enough consultation was not done, we then had a lot of messages from the public saying that they would want to come and submit because they feel they want to be part of this. How well did you consult your own Ministry?

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- We were invited. I, as the Acting Permanent Secretary, was there and I represented the interests of the Ministry. I also shared whatever I had picked up from the meetings. I could not attend one of the meetings, so our Head of Human Resources attended.

I had to brief him, and we spoke the same language. It is about continuity and sharing the information that we have.

HON. V. LAL.- I am referring to Article 4 of this Treaty, which talks about maintaining and developing individual and collective capacity. Does this mean that it requires Fiji to direct national health funds to upgrade the RFMFs technical medical corps, field hospitals and trauma response capabilities at the expense of civilian public healthcare services?

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- I do not see that as what we have to do. At the moment, we are collaborating with the hospitals in the Military. We have joint exercises for readiness in case of disasters, and we have just finished one over the month – the Bougainville exercise. We have ongoing relationships, capacity building within the country, and I do not see that this will cause any diversion. It will only assist us with technical support and in areas that we will need support.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- PS, in your negotiation, you represented your Ministry, so did you suggest or speak about Fiji and Australia's medical travel? We have that with India. It is very costly when you book a ticket or a hotel. My father paid $36,000 for a pacemaker surgery. I know what it costs. Do you have any initiative in this Treaty where we would be seeing experts from Australia coming here, looking at a number of cardiovascular diseases and the diabetic numbers that we have, or would it be easier for Fijians to travel to Australia and get their medical done? Is there any input around this in this Treaty from your Ministry?

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- As you see in my presentation in our Workplan, the second part of that Workplan is about the Vuvale Health Partnership with Australian hospitals and agencies. That is where we will have the twinning, where they will come and assist us. There is a broader assistance with that, so that we have more doctors and healthcare workers undergo training in capacity building and they can treat many patients whereas if an individual patient goes to Australia, he or she is only one, but when they come, you have many. This is part of that second assistance in the Health Workplan.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- I am glad you have highlighted your Workplan. The cost will be borne by the funding Australia has given to us, so that cost will cover the medical team to come here, provide the services and go back. That is part of the negotiation. Do you have a timeframe on when we would be seeing the medical team coming here?

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- We are already having them visit us, so we have visiting teams. It continues, but the only thing is, there are chances of more coming. It goes through different hospitals and different specialities. There are already visiting teams, and we have a term of reference for every visiting team.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- For a normal citizen, if they want to meet an expert from Australia only, what is the channel? I am asking this so that people who are tuning in would know from your response.

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- We also have our healthcare system, which is a three-tier system. We have the primary healthcare, the secondary and tertiary. Primary healthcare is at nursing stations and health centres. Secondary is our subdivisional hospitals and tertiary is our divisional. You will have more of the specialists in the tertiary. There is a referral pathway. You get referred upstream, depending on how severe or how complex your disease is that it requires a specialist assessment or management.

If you are already referred to a specialist, you attend the specialist clinic – the Special Outpatients Department (SOPD). They will be seen, assessed, and determined whether you are to be treated by the visiting team or you can be treated locally by the local team.

They will have a list. They know that we have clinical service networks for specialities. They will determine which medical visiting teams are coming in to complement or assist with complex cases. They will also know that when they come in, they will prepare the patients for that visit.

There is a list that they also communicate with the visiting team prior to them coming in so that they know which ones they can do and which ones they will not be able to because of the high risk, that we do not have a backup for those cases. So, that is the referral pathway.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- For your Workplan, I have two questions, and they are quite related. One is, when a particular funding is given, for example, to combat HIV in Fiji, or building infrastructure or the Master Plan, with your negotiations, are those fundings purely ring-fenced for that particular upgrade or infrastructure?

Recently, we noticed with your healthcare that the reagent was out of stock and tests like TFT, C81.25 and full blood count test were not possible. We had families waiting in the car park for over, I guess, a day or so. With the Australian funding now under this Treaty, do you see some flexibility around trying to close in the gaps as they occur? Do we have that level of flexibility?

My second question is on the visibility of this funding. If a particular funding states that we will upgrade the corridors of CWM Hospital by within six months, we need those reporting timelines and the visibility that this funding has actually been utilised as it said on paper or on the agreement?

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- On your first question, at the moment, our bilateral partnership has very flexible funding, and I am really thankful for that ongoing trust and how we have evolved over the years. They are very flexible. They assist us, they know what we go through and the challenges we have, so they are very flexible. I do not see that changing. It comes back again to how we plan well and how we assign budgets, and that is very important.

However, we should also be monitoring and looking at risks. If we think of risk in the beginning, at least, we can plan ahead and we can manoeuvre because we have pre-empted that. I think those are gaps - the way we plan things, but we are improving. I see that the experts who can help us improve on our systems will be provided.

HON. V. LAL.- Acting PS, knowing that the external judicial arbitration is completely barred as per Article 11(1) of this Treaty, if a major dispute arises regarding a local disease outbreak or biological contamination traced directly to visiting foreign military assets or bases, then how will the Ministry seek an independent investigation? How will that happen, because there is no national or international arbitration?

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- We will look at our legislation because we have a Public Health Act. We can use that law. If that fails, we have the international laws that we can look towards. We have avenues. Should it break down, we just ask advice from the Office of the Solicitor-General on which laws that we will have to use and ensure that Fiji is protected. I think, at the end of the day, it is about protecting Fiji and our people.

HON. V. LAL.- For information, Article 11(1) states that disputes shall not be referred to any national or international tribunal. That is where I am coming from.

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- I guess this may be taken at different scenarios because then, for us to go on to international, it will be something very drastic. However, for health, it is about the health of the nation and the health of the person, where we look at the person and treat the person so international laws come in that. If someone is sick, we have to treat them, no matter if we are enemies. We have to treat someone who needs our care. I think that principle for all health personnel should be in place.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- The point of the question is that it is more of an executive signoff instead of getting to a tribunal. That is what it is saying, in a case of a dispute where someone would get into the country with a disease or biological contamination, what are your views that this will not go to a tribunal, rather it will be an executive sign-off, or a dialogue? When we open our doors, we are opening our doors to every good and every bad. What are we

trying to scrutinise is how we can better mitigate all of these risks before they come to us at a cost? That is the point of the question.

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- I guess, if we have trust and there is room for trust, or we have already had that trust embedded, I envisage that we will settle it through consultation and negotiations. Whatever happens, we will have to be consulting each other in good faith. Again, it comes back to a relationship, how we are dealing with matters at the negotiation table. That is where we really need people who are very good with negotiation techniques. I think there is room for such events.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- PS, one last question from me. In your Workplan, what mechanisms do you have in place and that you will enforce when you look at standardised health, vaccination and biosecurity criteria of those who will be bringing in, probably, plant-based items or the K9 Unit from Australia, and how will Fiji grant its consent and entry into the country?

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- I had already mentioned that we have our own legislation, and we will use that. We are more for medicine. We have it for devices, and we have it for our professions. The animals come under the Ministry of Agriculture under their laws. We will have to use whatever laws we have, and we are currently using those.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- What if an infected animal comes in? What are Fiji's mitigation plans if we are to have an outbreak? We do not want to see another pandemic. I guess you could highlight some of the lessons learned from the pandemic.

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- Yes, Sir. We are in this one health where we work with human health, animal health and environmental health or plant health. We are already working under the Pharmacy Act where we have the National Antimicrobial Resistance Committee. It is a multisectoral committee, and we are already collaborating. When we have a spread of disease from animal to people, it is called zoonotic disease, and we are working on that, just like the avian flu that is a threat to the Southern Hemisphere.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- First, I declare my interest. We thank the Permanent Secretary and your team for highlighting our established guidelines and processes in the Ministry of Health. My question is, Australia has already funded the Master Plan for CWM Hospital, does this Treaty create any formal or informal preference for Australian financing, consultancy standards and Australian operating models for Fiji's future national hospitals? Australia is pouring in funding; does it mean that the Ministry will only take on what Australia is giving us in totality?

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- Currently, we have a working relationship with the platform, and that is the team that is looking after the Fiji Health Programme under the bilateral agreement with Australia. We are involved. We are part of any decision making that happens with how the fund is spent, and they have a workplan as well. For the duration of the engagement of the programme, they already have set the strategic direction, and they will come up with their workplan every year, which is assigned with a budget, so we are part of it. As I have said, we have been working for 38 years, we have really evolved and we have a better understanding.

For the last two programmes of five years, they have shifted towards localising. We also have a very good relationship with the team, because there are some locals needed so we have gone through working together in the Ministry, so we know each other and it is easy for us to negotiate and collaborate.

However, there is always an oversight from DFAT. It is more like the tripartite. It is not just between us and the programme, but also, we have input from DFAT. We learn from our gaps, and we just improve as we go along. We have come up with ways of working, how we communicate, and how we assess it.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- A follow-up question, through you, Deputy Chairperson. PS, can Fiji still seek the best financing packages from other development partners, other than letting Australia alone under this Treaty to direct the Ministry in concurrence with what they want to offer?

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- Currently, we have funding from other Governments and development partners. We also have our donor coordination meetings. It is there as well where we understand each other. I do not see this Treaty as disrupting whatever processes we have in place. We will continue to do what we do and improve on how we do things. There is more to gain. We learn from this Treaty that we can also share in that committee that we are transparent and honest with all our donor partners.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Apart from the tertiary level care that we are working on alongside with the platform and the Australian Government under this Treaty, would there be more emphasis on primary healthcare as well?

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- Yes, and that is where we are, as a Ministry, working towards transforming primary healthcare. From the reports of the World Bank, we are more hospital-centric, and looking at our budget, we are spending more money in tertiary care, hospital care, and less in primary healthcare, where we should make people healthy. We should be talking more about wellbeing instead of diseases, so that we can shift that - we have early detection

and resolve that they are healthy in the community. That is where we have that partnership as well with the community, that they understand their health status and we empower them to be well, look after themselves and to understand their body. That is where we are driving towards transforming primary healthcare.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- One part of the Article is the people movement between Australia and Fiji. We know that Australia is also having issues with health workers and they are poaching from Fiji – nurses, doctors and allied health. In this Treaty, can you discuss the human resource movement between the two countries and to have some agreements so that both countries can work together to resolve our human resource challenges?

DR. L. CIKAMATANA.- Yes, the workforce mobility is a challenge in the region. Through SPC, we are working towards having some understanding on mobility movement, respecting the countries where you really have a small number in the workforce. When we develop that as a region, it should help us, not only Fiji, but the other smaller countries.

What we can gain from the labour workforce mobility is that there is an avenue that they come back and help us. So, whatever experience and culture they gain in quality care, that will come and benefit us. However, it is how we welcome them and not see them as an outsider. We should welcome them so that when they want to come back, they should be able to come back and help.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Speaking of human resource, I have a last comment. Someone messaged me yesterday and asked, "Will the Vuvale Union pay my leftover overtime?" This was a medical staff, and I said that I will not answer that question. However, it is a serious matter, PS. I guess that the working conditions need to be matched in order for our people to remain in Fiji and in the system.

With that being said, since we have no other questions, I would like to thank the representatives of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services for availing themselves for this meeting. We appreciate your time and cooperation, and we look forward to your continued engagement should the Committee require any further information.

On that note, honourable Members and submittees, I declare this meeting closed.

The Committee Meeting adjourned at 4.18 p.m.

Ministry of Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport

- **Water Authority of Fiji (WAF)**
- **Fiji Roads Authority (FRA)**
- **Land Transport Authority (LTA)**
- **Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF)**

MPWMST PRESENTATION

FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION TREATY AND VEITACINI PARTNERSHIP TREATY

OUTLINE

- Ministry Overview
- Ministry Role & Involvement
- Key Treaty Provisions
- Existing & Proposed Cooperation
- Proposed 10 Year Workplan
- Anticipated Benefits & Opportunities
- Legislative, Policy and Regulatory Requirements
- Financial & Resource Implications
- Key Issues & Challenges
- Conclusion

Ministry Overview

- The Ministry is responsible for policy formulation, planning, regulation, implementation and monitoring across the sectors of:
  - Public Infrastructure and Public Works;
  - Roads and Bridges;
  - Water and Sewerage;
  - Energy;
  - Government Buildings;
  - Transport (Land & Maritime);
  - Meteorological and Hydrological Services
- Also provides policy oversight and coordination with key agencies including the Fiji Roads Authority (FRA), Water Authority of Fiji (WAF), Fiji Meteorological Service (FMS), Department of Energy, Land Transport Authority (LTA), Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF).
- Supports implementation of the proposed **Fiji–Australia Vuvale Union Treaty** and **Veitacini Partnership Treaty**.

MINISTRY ROLE & INVOLVEMENT

The Ministry's involvement in the Treaties is primarily centred on sectors where Australia has historically been a major development and technical partner, including:

- Climate-resilient transport infrastructure – Critical Bridges Construction by FRA
- Maritime connectivity – TOR on Legislations and reform MSAF institution
- Renewable energy and rural electrification – Support for Fiji Rural Electrification Programme
- Meteorological and early warning systems -
- Infrastructure planning and asset management.

Key Treaty Provisions

From the Ministry's perspective, key areas likely to fall within its mandate include:

1) Resilient Infrastructure Development - Resilient public infrastructure, Water and Sanitation systems, Road and bridge development, Port and jetty infrastructure and Government building rehabilitation and construction.

2) Transport Cooperation - Maritime connectivity, Land transport planning, Transport Safety and regulatory strengthening and Sustainable transport and mobility initiatives

3) Energy Cooperation - Renewable energy deployment, Rural electrification and Energy security and resilience.

4) Meteorological Cooperation - Weather forecasting enhancement, Climate data sharing, Hydrological monitoring and Early warning systems.

Existing & Proposed Cooperation

Current Infrastructure and Transport

- Australian support for climate-resilient infrastructure programs.
- Collaboration through reviews of maritime legislations and institutional structure – TOR with Govt of Australia
- Meteorological Services - Partnerships with international agencies to strengthen forecasting capabilities, data systems and technical expertise. Support for weather monitoring and climate resilience initiatives.

Opportunities for Strengthening Cooperation

The Treaties could facilitate:

- Greater Australian investment in strategic infrastructure – roads, bridges, jetties, water and sanitation (2050 Water Strategy and Rural Water and Sanitation Master Plan)
- Enhanced technical assistance and skills transfer – Apprenticeship scheme and volunteer exchange programme.
- Upgrading digitalisation of systems – Asset Management, Transportation Network, Water Network and Energy Management.
- Expansion of renewable energy programme.
- Improving Transport Networks – Land and Maritime
- Modernisation of meteorological observation networks.
- Capacity building across engineering, finance and project management, infrastructure legislation and policies and forecasting disciplines.

Proposed 10 Year Workplan

The Ministry envisages contributing to the 10-Year Work Plan through the National Development Plan on the following pillars and chapters:

Pillar 1- Economic Resilience

Chapter 5- Catalysing Economic Growth and diversifying the economy (Construction Industry, Research and Development and Innovation)

Pillar 2- People Empowerment

Chapter 6 - Uplifting Socioeconomic wellbeing (Rural and Outer Island development)

Chapter 7- Developing Public Infrastructure, protecting environment and addressing climate change (Transport, Energy and Electricity, Water and Waste Water, Environment and Climate Change, National Disaster Risk Reduction)

Major current planning documents – Water Sector Strategy 2050, Fiji Rural Water and Sanitation Master Plan, MSAF, LTA and FRA Strategic Plans

Ministry is currently developing a 5 year Strategic Development Plan

Anticipated Benefits & Opportunities

The Ministry expects the Treaties to generate significant benefits, including:

- Economic Benefits - Increased investment in strategic infrastructure, Improved trade and logistics efficiency and Reduced costs associated with improved infrastructure qualities.
- Social Benefits - Better access to transport, water and energy services. Improved service delivery to rural and maritime communities and Enhanced public safety.
- Environmental Benefits - Increased climate resilience, Reduced emissions through renewable energy initiatives.
- Institutional Benefits - Enhanced capacity of government agencies, Improved technical expertise and greater access to modern technologies and systems.

Legislative, Policy and Regulatory Requirements

Implementation may require:

Legislative Reviews & Policy Updates

- Transport-related legislation – FRA, MSAF and LTA
- Meteorological and hydrological services legislation – Fiji MET
- Infrastructure resilience standards – DBGA (National Building Code)
- Energy sector regulatory frameworks – Energy & EFL
- Institutional Arrangements – Ministry & CSAs
- Enhanced inter-agency coordination mechanisms – Ministry & CSA
- Strengthened project governance frameworks – Ministry & CSA
- Improved monitoring and evaluation systems – Ministry & CSA

(A detailed legal review will be required should the treaty be finalized and implementation plans are confirmed.)

Financial, Staffing and Resource Implications

Implementation may require:

- Financial Resources - Financing of major infrastructure projects, Operation and maintenance funding & Technology and equipment procurement.
- Human Resources – Engineers, Project managers, Meteorologists, Transport planners, Asset management specialists, Climate resilient finance experts and finance and policy management.
- Infrastructure and Equipment – PWD heavy equipment and plant machinery, Govt Shipping fleet, specialized instruments, public buildings repairs and maintenance, modern weather observation systems, Data and asset management systems.
- Capacity Building - Professional training, Technical exchanges and Scholarships and specialist certification programmes.

Key Issues & Challenges

The Ministry respectfully submits the following considerations for the Committee:

1. Climate Change and Natural Disasters
2. Infrastructure Maintenance Backlogs
3. Capacity Constraints
4. Procurement and Project Delivery Risks
5. Long-Term Funding Sustainability
6. Coordination Across Agencies
7. Govt financial year and systems

Conclusion

- The Ministry of Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport strongly supports initiatives that deepen Fiji-Australia cooperation in infrastructure, transport, energy, meteorological services and climate resilience.

- The Ministry stands ready to work closely with Government, development partners and stakeholders to ensure that the commitments arising from the Treaties translate into tangible and sustainable benefits for Fiji over the next decade.

Vinaka Vakalevu

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BRIEFING SUBMISION FOR THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION TREATY AND VEITACINI PARTNERSHIP TREATY

Madam Chairperson and Honourable Members of the Committee,

The Ministry of Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport (MPWMST) welcomes the opportunity to provide its views on the proposed Fiji-Australia **Vuvale Union Treaty** and **Veitacini Partnership Treaty**, and to outline the Ministry's role and responsibilities in supporting the implementation of these landmark bilateral arrangements.

The Ministry's mandate encompasses policy development, planning, regulation, implementation and oversight of public infrastructure, transport systems, energy development, government buildings, meteorological and hydrological services. Through its departments and associated agencies, including the Fiji Roads Authority (FRA), Water Authority of Fiji (WAF), Department of Energy, Fiji Meteorological Service (FMS), Land Transport Authority (LTA) and Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF), the Ministry plays a critical role in Fiji's economic development, connectivity, climate resilience and public service delivery.

A. Ministry Role and Involvement in the Development and Proposed Implementation of the Treaties

The Ministry's involvement in the Treaties is primarily centred on sectors where Australia has historically been a major development and technical partner, including:

- Climate-resilient transport infrastructure.
- Rural and maritime connectivity.
- Water and sanitation infrastructure.
- Renewable energy and rural electrification.
- Meteorological and early warning systems.

- Disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation.
- Infrastructure planning and asset management.

Australia has supported numerous infrastructure and climate resilience initiatives in Fiji through bilateral assistance programs and multilateral financing arrangements. The proposed Treaties provide a framework to elevate this cooperation from project-based engagement to a long-term strategic partnership.

The Ministry anticipates playing a lead implementation and coordination role in ensuring infrastructure, transport, energy and meteorological sector commitments are incorporated into national planning processes and delivered through the proposed 10-Year Work Plan.

B. Key Treaty Provisions Relevant to the Ministry

From the Ministry's perspective, key areas likely to fall within its mandate include:

Resilient Infrastructure Development

- Resilient public infrastructure.
- Road and bridge development.
- Port and jetty infrastructure.
- Government building rehabilitation and construction.

Transport Cooperation

- Maritime connectivity.
- Land transport planning.
- Transport safety and regulatory strengthening.
- Sustainable transport and mobility initiatives.

Energy Cooperation

- Renewable energy deployment.
- Rural electrification.
- Energy security and resilience.

Meteorological Cooperation

- Weather forecasting enhancement.
- Climate data sharing.
- Hydrological monitoring.
- Early warning systems.

Climate Resilience

- Adaptation planning.
- Nature-based infrastructure solutions.
- Disaster preparedness and recovery.

These areas align closely with Fiji's infrastructure priorities and the Ministry's strategic objectives for enhancing resilience and service delivery.

C. Existing and Proposed Fiji-Australia Cooperation within the Ministry Portfolio

Existing Cooperation

Current and recent cooperation includes:

Infrastructure and Transport

- Australian support for climate-resilient infrastructure programs.
- Collaboration through regional development financing mechanisms.
- Support for rural and maritime infrastructure development.

Meteorological Services

- Partnerships with international agencies to strengthen forecasting capabilities, data systems and technical expertise.
- Support for weather monitoring and climate resilience initiatives.

Climate and Disaster Resilience

- Joint efforts aimed at strengthening resilience of critical infrastructure to cyclones, flooding and sea-level rise.
- Support for adaptation planning and disaster preparedness.

Opportunities for Strengthening Cooperation

The Treaties could facilitate:

- Greater Australian investment in strategic infrastructure.
- Enhanced technical assistance and skills transfer.
- Joint research and innovation in climate adaptation.
- Digitalisation of asset management systems.
- Expansion of renewable energy projects.
- Modernisation of meteorological observation networks.

- Capacity building across engineering, transport regulation and forecasting disciplines.

D. Ministry Responsibilities under the Proposed 10-Year Work Plan

The Ministry envisages contributing to the 10-Year Work Plan through the National Development Plan on the following pillars and chapters:

- **Pillar 1- Economic Resilience**

  Chapter 5- Catalysing Economic Growth and diversifying the economy (Construction Industry, Research and Development and Innovation)

- **Pillar 2- People Empowerment**

  Chapter 6 - Uplifting Socioeconomic wellbeing (Rural and Outer Island development)

  Chapter 7- Developing Public Infrastructure, protecting environment and addressing climate change (Transport, Energy and Electricity, Water and Waste Water, Environment and Climate Change, National Disaster Risk Reduction)

- Major current planning documents – Water Sector Strategy 2050, Fiji Rural Water and Sanitation Master Plan, MSAF, LTA and FRA Strategic Plans

- Ministry is currently developing a 5 year Strategic Development Plan

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E. Anticipated Benefits and Opportunities for Fiji

The Ministry expects the Treaties to generate significant benefits, including:

Economic Benefits

- Increased investment in strategic infrastructure.
- Improved trade and logistics efficiency.
- Reduced costs associated with infrastructure failures.

Social Benefits

- Better access to transport, water and energy services.
- Improved service delivery to rural and maritime communities.
- Enhanced public safety.

Environmental Benefits

- Increased climate resilience.
- Reduced emissions through renewable energy initiatives.
- Better environmental monitoring and management.

Institutional Benefits

- Enhanced capacity of government agencies.
- Improved technical expertise.
- Greater access to modern technologies and systems.

F. Legislative, Policy and Regulatory Requirements

Implementation may require:

Legislative Reviews

- Transport-related legislation.
- Meteorological and hydrological services legislation.
- Infrastructure resilience standards.
- Energy sector regulatory frameworks.

Policy Updates

- Transport sector strategies.
- Climate adaptation policies.
- Infrastructure asset management policies.
- Renewable energy frameworks.

Institutional Arrangements

- Enhanced inter-agency coordination mechanisms.
- Strengthened project governance frameworks.
- Improved monitoring and evaluation systems.

At this stage, no major legislative impediments have been identified; however detailed legal review would be required once final treaty obligations and implementation plans are confirmed.

G. Financial, Staffing and Resource Implications

Implementation may require:

Financial Resources

- Co-financing of major infrastructure projects.
- Operation and maintenance funding.
- Technology and equipment procurement.

Human Resources

- Engineers.
- Project managers.
- Meteorologists.
- Transport planners.
- Asset management specialists.
- Climate adaptation experts.

Infrastructure and Equipment

- Modern weather observation systems.
- Climate monitoring equipment.
- Data management systems.
- Asset condition monitoring technologies.

Capacity Building

- Professional training.
- Technical exchanges.
- Scholarships and specialist certification programmes.

H. Key Issues, Risks and Challenges

The Ministry respectfully submits the following considerations for the Committee:

1. Climate Change and Natural Disasters

Infrastructure remains vulnerable to cyclones, flooding, storm surges and landslides. Increased resilience standards may lead to higher upfront project costs.

2. Infrastructure Maintenance Backlogs

Aging infrastructure requires substantial rehabilitation and ongoing maintenance investments. Roads, bridges, water systems and maritime assets face growing demands.

3. Capacity Constraints

There remains a need for specialised technical expertise in engineering, project delivery, forecasting technology and climate adaptation.

4. Procurement and Project Delivery Risks

Delays may arise due to procurement processes, contractor capacity, regulatory approvals and unforeseen environmental factors.

5. Long-Term Funding Sustainability

Future commitments under the Treaties should be aligned with Fiji's fiscal capacity and long-term maintenance responsibilities.

6. Coordination Across Agencies

Successful implementation will require strong coordination across Ministries, statutory authorities, development partners and the private sector.

Conclusion

The Ministry of Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport strongly supports initiatives that deepen Fiji-Australia cooperation in infrastructure, transport, energy, meteorological services and climate resilience. The proposed Vuvale Union Treaty and Veitacini Partnership Treaty present a significant opportunity to strengthen Fiji's development trajectory through long-term strategic investment, enhanced technical cooperation and improved resilience outcomes for all Fijians.

The Ministry stands ready to work closely with Government, development partners and stakeholders to ensure that the commitments arising from the Treaties translate into tangible and sustainable benefits for Fiji over the next decade.

[VERBATIM REPORT]

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

UNION/TREATY

(1) FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION
(2) OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE (VEITACINI TREATY)

ENTITIES: (1) Ministry of Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport
(2) Water Authority of Fiji (WAF)

(3) Fiji Roads Authority (FRA)

(4) Land Transport Authority (LTA)

(5) Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF)

VENUE: Big Committee Room (East Wing)

DATE: Friday, 11th September, 2026

VERBATIM REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE HELD AT THE COMMITTEE ROOM (EASTWING), PARLIAMENT PRECINCTS, GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, ON FRIDAY, 11TH SEPTEMBER, 2026 AT 2.24 P.M.

Present

Hon. R.R. Sharma	-	Deputy Chairperson
Hon. P.K. Ravunawa	-	Member
Hon. V. Lal	-	Member
Hon. S. Kumar	-	Alternate Member

Apologies

Hon. L.S. Qereqeretabua	-	Chairperson
Hon. I. Tuiwailevu	-	Member
Hon. T.R. Matasawalevu	-	Member

Interviewee/Submittee: Ministry of Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport

In Attendance:

(1) Mr. Paula Baleilevuka - Permanent Secretary
(2) Mr. Mikaele Balena - Deputy Secretary Operations
(3) Mr. Alipate Mataivilia - Manager Policy, Monitoring and Evaluation
(4) Ms. Aseri Driu - Director Transport
(5) Mr. Josaia Koroilavesau - Chief Assets Management Officer – WAF
(6) Mr. Razik Khan - Manager - Standards and Engineering, LTA
(7) Mr. Timoci Ratuva - General Manager - Special Projects, FRA
(8) Mr. Samisoni Waqavakatoga - Fiji Meteorological Services
(9) Ms. Arieta Baleisolomone - Fiji Meteorological Services
(10) Mr. Tui Kilakila - Legal Team – MSAF

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Honourable Members, the Ministry of Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport, representatives from the commercial statutory authorities, members of the media and the public and dear viewers, ladies and gentlemen; a

very good evening to you all. It is my pleasure to welcome everyone present in this room and those joining us via live broadcast.

At the outset for information purposes, I wish to advise that pursuant to the Standing Orders of Parliament, specifically Standing Order 111, all Committee meetings are open to the public and the media. Accordingly, this meeting is open to the public and the members of the media. However, should there be any sensitive information relating to this submission that cannot be disclosed publicly, such information may be provided to the Committee either in writing or in a closed session. This will only be permitted in limited circumstances, including matters related to national security, third-party confidential information, personnel or human resource matters and Committee deliberation and development of recommendations and reports.

I wish to remind honourable Members and witnesses that all comments and questions should be directed through the Chair. For viewers following this meeting live on *Facebook*, questions may be submitted via the comments section. Please, note that only relevant questions will be considered by the Committee. Members of the Committee may interject during the submission or, alternatively, questions will be raised at the conclusion of the presentation.

I further remind all present that this is a parliamentary proceeding. All information provided is protected under the Parliamentary Powers and Privileges Act and Standing Orders of Parliament. Slander and libel of any kind will not be condoned, and all information presented to the Committee should be factual.

In terms of meeting protocols, movement within the meeting should be kept to a minimum. The usage of mobile phones is discouraged, and all mobile phones must be placed on silent for the duration of the meeting.

I will now introduce the Members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence.

(Introduction of Committee Members and Secretariat)

Today, the Committee will receive an in-person joint submission from the Ministry of Public Works, Metrological Services and Transport and representatives from the commercial statutory authorities in relation to the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance or Veitacini Treaty currently before the Committee.

Now, I invite the representatives present today to introduce themselves and proceed with your submission. Please, note you have 15 minutes for your opening statement, and then

there will be questions from the Committee Members. Kindly note that your microphone should be turned on before you speak and turned off immediately after you speak to avoid any disruption to the live submission.

MR. P. BALEILEVUKA.- Thank you, Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members of the Committee. Let me ask my team to individually introduce themselves.

(Introduction of Ministry Officials Officials from Statutory Authorities)

In our submission this afternoon, we will be responding to questions raised. Those questions are identified under 4(a) to (h). There is also a written submission prepared by the Ministry, so our response will be related to those three documents – Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union; Ocean of Peace Alliance; and we will be responding to the written analysis as well.

To begin our presentation, I will ask Mr. Mataivilia to commence with our presentation.

MR. A. MATAIVILIA.- Deputy Chairperson, my humble task this afternoon is to present an overview of our Ministry's role and responsibilities, and a brief of those questions that have been asked in the letter that was received by our Permanent Secretary. We will discuss the key treaties provisions that relate to our Ministry, existing proposed cooperation, the proposed 10-year plan, the anticipated benefits and opportunities that we thought can benefit the Ministry, and the relative legislative policy and regulatory requirements that can also be affected while trying to adopt these two Treaties. We will also discuss the financial and resource implications that we will be having, the key challenges, and the conclusion of this presentation, which we strongly support the two Treaties that are before us.

On the overview, our Ministry is responsible for policy formulation, planning, regulation, implementation, and monitoring across the sectors of public works, roads and bridges, water and

sewerage, energy, government buildings, transport, and meteorological and hydrological services. We also provide an oversight in coordination with key agencies, including Fiji Roads Authority (FRA), Water Authority of Fiji (WAF), Land Transport Authority (LTA), and Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF). As we have already highlighted above, we support the implementation of this proposed Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Veitacini Treaty.

In terms of the Ministry's role and involvement in the Treaties, it is primarily centred on sectors where Australia has historically been a major development and technical partner and that includes the following:

(1) Climate and Resilient Transport Infrastructure

We have benefited from the Government of Australia through some of the critical bridges that have been constructed around the country. We have our FRA representative, who will discuss more on this.

(2) Maritime Connectivity

We are currently working with the Government of Australia through a terms of reference on legislation review and the reform of the institution - MSAF.

(3) Renewable Energy and Rural Electrification

There is strong support for the Fiji Rural Electricity Programme.

(4) Meteorological Services

Early warning systems and infrastructure planning and asset management.

From the Ministry's perspective, some of the key provisions or areas that are likely to fall within its mandate include:

- Resilient infrastructure development - resilient public infrastructure, water and sanitation systems, road and bridge development, port and jetties infrastructure, and government building, rehabilitation and construction.
- Transport cooperation - maritime connectivity, land transport planning, land transport safety and regulatory strengthening, and sustainable transport and mobility initiatives.
- Energy cooperation - We are interested more in renewable energy development, rural electrification and energy security, and resilience.
- Meteorological cooperation – weather forecasting enhancement, climate data sharing, hydrological monitoring and early warning systems are some of the priority areas that we need to focus on, moving forward.

Through the existing and proposed cooperation, the current infrastructure and transport, Australian support for climate resilient infrastructure programme, as I have already highlighted above, in terms of assistance provided to FRA, a substantial amount of bridge construction, collaboration through the reviews of our legislations and assistance to meteorological services.

These are some of the opportunities that we would like to emphasise for strengthening our cooperation.

(1) Greater Australian investment in strategic infrastructure

We have already highlighted the importance of the Government of Australia in stepping in to assist us in infrastructure development, as they have already done in the past on the construction of those key bridges. Now, we are looking at roads, jetties, water and sanitation. We already have our 2050 Water Strategy and the Rural Water and Sanitation Master Plan. Those are our highlighted plans in of the coming years, moving forward, in terms of the infrastructure that we are handling at the Ministry.

(2) Enhance technical assistance and skills transfer

This is one area that we also want to propose, the apprenticeship scheme and the volunteer exchange programmes that we used to have with our development partners.

(3) Upgrading and digitalisation of our systems, asset management, transportation networks, and energy management

These are some of the key areas that we would like to be more clear in this Vuvale Union and the Treaty that we are about to sign.

(4) Expansion of our renewable energy programme This is one of the key priorities.

(5) Improving our transport network, both land and maritime

We have some challenges with our Government Shipping fleet, so those are some of the areas that we would like to have in this Treaty.

(6) Modernisation of meteorological observation networks and capacity building

This is across the technical areas that we have under the Ministry in terms of engineering, finance, project management, infrastructure legislation, policies, and forecasting.

For the proposed 10-year Workplan, we already have our National Development Plan where our Ministry is very much aligned to. We have two pillars - Economic Resilience and People Empowerment.

We have relevant chapters where the Ministry has aligned our priorities on those pillars, and it will guide our work, moving forward, as far as our National Development Plan goes.

Some of the major planning documents that we already have with the Ministry are the:

(1) Water Sector Strategy;
(2) Fiji Rural Water and Sanitation Master Plan; and
(3) MSAF, LTA, and FRA Strategic Plans.

Those are planning documents that are guiding the work of our Commercial Statutory Authorities (CSAs) and the Ministry, moving forward.

We are currently developing a 5-Year Strategic Plan. We are trying to put together all the plans as far as infrastructure, transport and meteorological services is concerned. These are some of the anticipated benefits that we have highlighted and are in four categories: economic benefits, social benefits, environmental benefits and institutional benefits. Details of these are in our submission.

Some of the legislative policies and regulatory requirements that will be affected in terms of adopting the Treaties are as follows:

(1) Transport-related legislation, which encompasses -
- laws governing FRA, MSAF and LTA.
- New enacted law for Fiji Meteorological Services.
- Infrastructure Resilient Standards and the National Building Code where our Department of Public Works and Department of Building and Government Architects are governed under.
- Energy Sector Regulatory Frameworks where we have the Department of Energy and EFL working together in that area.
- Institutional arrangements whereby some reforms are required in the Ministry and our respective CSAs.
- Enhance inter-agency coordination and mechanism.
- Strengthen project governance framework.
- Improve our monitoring and evaluation system, both in our Ministry and in CSAs.

- A detailed legal review will be required, should the treaty be finalised, and implementation plans are confirmed.

(2) Financial staffing and resource implications: These are some of the great needs that will come along with the adoption of the Treaty in terms of financial resources – the financing of major infrastructure projects and operation maintenance funding.

(3) Human resource: We have technical areas that we need to address, such as:

- Engineers;
- Project Managers,
- Meteorologists;
- Transport Planners; and
- Finance and Policy Management.

(4) Infrastructure equipment: This is one area we also would like to strengthen. This Government has brought back PWD, so we really need the machines and the capacity for the Ministry to move this forward –

- PWD heavy equipment.
- Plant and machinery.
- Government Shipping fleet that we have. We need to refit our Government shipping with specialised instruments, public buildings, repairs, maintenance, and data and assets management systems.

(5) Capacity building: We want to focus on professional trainings, technical exchanges, scholarships, and specialist certification programme, which is very much required in the Ministry.

Below are some of the issues and challenges that we want to bring to the table for consideration:

(1) Climate change and natural disasters – These are the major factors that is affecting the work that we are delivering on the ground.
(2) Infrastructure maintenance backlogs or the archaic assets that we are having - we need this maintenance programme rolling and running.
(3) Capacity constraints - we have lost some key employees or some key professionals in the Ministry, so we really need to bring back those capacities.
(4) Procurement and project delivery risks, long-term funding sustainability and coordination across agencies.
(5) Government financial year and financial systems – this is one of the factors that is really affecting our performance on the ground. Perhaps, the PS will elaborate more on this.

In conclusion, the Ministry of Public Works strongly supports the initiatives that deepen FijiAustralia operation in infrastructure, transport, energy, meteorological services and climate resilience. The Ministry also stands by to work closely with Government, developing partners and stakeholders, to ensure that the commitment arising from the Treaties translate into tangible and sustainable benefit for Fiji over the next decade.

MR. P. BALEILEVUKA.- If I may just summarise the position of the Ministry in relation to the two documents - the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance or Veitacini Treaty, the Ministry does not object to the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance, particularly, where the proposed cooperation strengthens Fiji's resilience, infrastructure connectivity, climate security and national capacity. From the Ministry's perspective, the greatest opportunity presented by the Treaties is to move beyond individual projects towards a more strategic, predictable, and long-term partnership in infrastructure, transport, maritime and aviation capability, including meteorological services, climate resilience and critical infrastructure protection.

The Ministry would welcome a structured programme of cooperation that combines infrastructure, financing, with technical assistance, knowledge transfer, skills development and institutional strengthening. At the same time, it is important that cooperation strengthens Fiji's own institutions and implementation capability. External assistance should complement Government systems and build sustainable national capacity rather than create parallel structures or long-term dependency.

The Ministry, therefore, considers that the implementation of the Treaties should be guided by these principles –

(1) alignment with Fiji's national priorities;
(2) predictable and sustainable financing over the life of the projects; and
(3) genuine transfer of knowledge, skills, technology, and implementation capability transfer from skills in Australia to Fiji.

If these principles are maintained, the Vuvale Union and the Veitacini Treaty provide an important opportunity to strengthen Fiji's infrastructure and national resilience, while also contributing to Fiji's role as a regional transport, logistics and service hub, and to the wider resilience and security of the Pacific.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you for your comprehensive presentation. I open the floor for questions, and I will begin with the first question. What part of the $1.5 billion in the 10year plan is concessional loan and a grant, and what portion will your Ministry be receiving?

MR. P. BALEILEVUKA.- We do not have that information with us. That is one thing that we noticed with the documents that were given to us. It does not include the 10-year development plan, and it also does not include the $1.5 billion assistance, so we do not have a breakdown of that. Apologies for that, Deputy Chairperson.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- No worries, PS, because there is a lot of talk about the Pacific way. The question is, what is the Pacific way? They talk about dialogue, but the whole work of the Committee is to scrutinise and, obviously, have the best outcome and protect Fiji's interests. In terms of consultations, I think this is where the Committee finds that there has been an issue. Were you able to sit and have a word with each other before you made submissions to the negotiations of the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union?

MR. P. BALEILEVUKA.- If you are referring to whether we were consulted in the formulation of the Vuvale Union, personally, as a Permanent Secretary, I was not referred to, but I think that was the responsibility entrusted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as the Office of the Prime Minister.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- My understanding would be, since you are the Permanent Secretary or basically the CEO of the Ministry, you would have consulted WAF, FRA and LTA, and had probably a framework of a workplan and had it submitted to the PS or our negotiators so that we are in a better space, rather than just having an empty framework of $1.5 billion, yet then we fill in the gaps so whoever needs it. That is what I want clarification on, but it is unfortunate that that has not happened.

MR. A. MATAIVILIA.- To add on to what the PS has elaborated, we have circulated this request to all our stakeholders, getting all their comments and we are trying to put together their respective submissions in that presentation. If you want to talk about individual CSAs and for the Ministry, we have the representative here who can elaborate more on your request.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- My point is, this Treaty itself is quite ambiguous in my perspective, and rather we thought when negotiations happened, because the PS of the Prime Minister's Office said we had consulted various Permanent Secretaries and not a wider consultation with the public, that is where we understand that every stakeholder and Ministry had put in their workplan or what is required rather than keeping a very wide scope and it can be very ambiguous. For example, the Ministry of Health stated that maybe, $10 million per year would be given to their budget to support their operations, infrastructure, et cetera. That is what I was trying to get, what portion of this $1.5 billion in the 10-year plan would actually go to the various stakeholders, because your Ministry is one of the largest Ministries. We are looking at Fiji's infrastructure, which is a very costly affair. That was my point.

MR. P. BALEILEVUKA.- Deputy Chairperson, the question that you raised is contained in question 4(a) which is the Ministry's role and involvement in the development and proposed implementation of the Treaties. We have our response to that. The Ministry's role arises primarily from the responsibilities for public infrastructure, roads, maritime transport and safety, meteorological services, climate information, transport connectivity and related critical infrastructure. The written analysis was submitted together with the documents, aand that the proposed Vuvale Union is intended to move the Fiji-Australia relationship towards a more structured and enduring framework, including cooperation on economic infrastructure, climate action, connectivity, digital transition and protection of critical infrastructure.

The Ministry, therefore, sees the role principally as the implementing and technical agency, working with Government's overall policy and treaty arrangements. The Ministry would contribute with technical advice, project identification, implementation capacity, standards, regulatory support and sector expertise to an agreed programme arising from the Treaties. The Ministry has not been identified in the document as having a separate treaty-making or diplomatic role. Its role would instead be to support the Government in translating the commitments under the Treaties into practical infrastructure, transport, climate resilient and meteorological outcomes for Fiji.

In response to your question about the fund provided or indicated, the Ministry has its own development plans, which are costed. Because of the absence of the 10-year development plan in the document, we cannot identify whether our plans are also included in the 10-year development plan. However, if you need some of that information, I may ask WAF to provide some of the projects that they have included in their 2050 plan, to advise whether they have costed some of these.

MR. J. KOROILAVESAU.- Yes, with the ongoing consultations on this partnership, WAF had included a number of projects as proposals to be funded through this, specifically for the NadiLautoka Water Supply System and Wastewater Services. This included specific infrastructure projects, including the Vaturu to Nagado Trunk Pipeline works, as well as ongoing non-revenue water aspects of the Nadi- Lautoka system, and the Sanitation Treatment Plant at Sabeto.

Those are some of the key infrastructure projects that we had proposed to be funded through this, given the importance of the Nadi-Lautoka system in support of tourism - not only through Nadi, but the surrounding areas along the Coral Coast and onwards. It culminated at a total of around FJD500 million.

MR. P. BALEILEVUKA.- That is for WAF, but we also have FRA with their own plan. As I have said earlier, Deputy Chairperson, it is not clear to us whether those projects are included in the fund that you are referring to.

HON. V. LAL.- PS, I think what you are saying is your role now, once this Treaty is in place. The actual question was, what was your input or input of your stakeholders under your Ministry during the formulation of this Treaty? That is what we were asking, and you have made your stand very clear that you are in favour of this Treaty. However, there are certain clarifications which we need to clarify to remove that ambiguity and the concerns of the people.

The first question is in regard to Article 4(2)(b) of this Treaty. Apart from Australia, if we are able to negotiate with other countries in terms of upgrading or managing our major seaports and international airports at a cheaper rate, does that mean that once this Treaty is in place, we are not able to do it and we will have to get a 'yes' from Australia if Australia allows us to do it? I hope you know what I am trying to say. Simply, apart from Australia, if we engage other countries at a cheaper rate, are we able to do it or do we have to seek from Australia? Will Australia allow us to do it? These are the technical questions which we need to answer.

MR. P. BALEILEVUKA.- Personally, I do not think the Treaty locks us to obtain funding from Australia. I think we are still open to get funding from other multi-funding agencies, like the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and IAB. I do not believe we are locked into this Treaty. This is an assistance provided by Australia and it is up to the Government to decide where we can channel these assistance to.

HON. V. LAL.- Will Australia provide specific financial grants and technological transfers to help Fiji's transport sector transition, its domestic maritime shipping fleet and aviation network to net zero as the plan is, and how is this going to affect our budget?

MR. P. BALEILEVUKA.- Australia is already providing that assistance. Can I invite Director Transport to outline some of the assistance that are already provided by Australia now?

MS. A. DRIU.- Honourable Members, just further to what PS had alluded to, Australia is currently assisting Fiji in terms of the review of our legislations, and this particularly is for maritime legislations, which we have already obtained Cabinet Decisions on the Maritime Transport Act, Ship Registration Act 2014, and Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji Act 2009. Apart from that, they will also be assisting us in the institutional reform for MSAF, particularly, in the enhancement of the services.

With reference to Article, 42(b) at the IMO negotiations, we just recently returned from one. Australia has always been supporting Fiji in terms of working towards the adoption of net zero framework, and if all goes well as planned and negotiations conclude in November this year, then we would also see the adoption of the net zero framework in the first week of December later this year. They have been supporting Fiji and so has other Pacific Island countries in our

interventions delivered at IMO and our alignment to 1.5. I hope we have answered your questions.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Just a follow-up question on that. In your recent convention that you attended, was there any discussion about the coal mining in Australia, when you talk about the zero emission here in Fiji?

MS. A. DRIU.- That did not come up in our negotiation, if you are referring to the previous one that we had just attended.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- My question to the Meteorological Services on meteorological data sovereignty and regional security, Article 4(4)(b), commits the party to supporting adaptation and mobility with dignity for Pacific people, recognising the existential threat posed by climate change. How will Fiji's Meteorological Services ensure that the raw meteorological data are kept locally, other than being controlled by Australia?

MS. A. BALEISOLOMONE.- With reference to the sovereignty of data for Fiji, we are the sole custodians of Fiji's historical climate data. We currently have a DARE project, which is a data rescue exercise. We have some data that are still in hard copy, but at the moment, we are trying to have them all digitised to assist in the analysis of climate change in various parts of the country. However, in terms of custodian of data, we are the sole custodians of Fiji's historical data.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- So we have our data storage base and sitting locally?

MS. A. BALEISOLOMONE.- Yes, we do have the database at our server within our office.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Are we obligated, under this Treaty, to only purchase digital equipment or digital forensic equipment from Australia?

MR. P. BALELEVUKA.- My apologies, does it say that somewhere in the Treaty?

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- That is what I am asking.

MR. P. BALELEVUKA.- I do not think the Treaty is confining us to just access information or technologies from Australia. I do not think we are confined to that. The Treaty is offering assistance from Australia. It is opening up assistance that will be provided by Australia to Fiji.

However, some of the assistance will be channelled to where Fiji wants that assistance to be channelled to.

HON. V. LAL.- Just one clarification on that. I think what the Treaty is saying that we have to meet the Australian cyber security standards, which means that the equipment has to be from Australia. If you get it from somewhere else, they might say, that is not matching our standards. That is where I think that question is coming from.

MR. P. BALEILEVUKA.- Deputy Chairperson, can we refer these questions to the Ministry responsible for IT? I think they would probably be in a better position to answer that than my Ministry.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Sure, PS. Now what I realise is the lack of consultation done within. Before coming to the PS in the Prime Minister's Office, every stakeholder should have known what the ask is, rather than just saying, "We are handed $1.5 billion. Oh, great!" However, where are we utilising it? For example, if we want our security standards to be of Australian level, yet we are using Chinese-made products or Israeli products, there is a big question mark in terms of the sovereignty of this country, in terms of our port, our climate, and our data. These are the questions the Committee is asking you because you are the stakeholders, and this will reflect down and that is what the Committee wants to recommend. I am quite disappointed, I guess, that we are not receiving the answers that we are looking for.

HON. S. KUMAR.- This question is to the Public Works on climate adaptation infrastructure in that regard. Article 3(4) states that economic growth and security requires fiscal stability and resilient infrastructure. How will the Ministry align its national building code and public works engineering standards with the climate resilience framework developed under the Vuvale Union? Will Australia provide direct structural engineering aid for seawall and coastal road enforcements?

MR. P. BALEILEVUKA.- The building code is still being developed at the moment. In the development of the building code, there has been constant discussions with the Government of Australia, Government of New Zealand and the Institute of Engineers in Fiji, and other stakeholders. It has to be aligned to the specifications adopted by WAF, FRA and the Public Works specifications. So, yes, it is still being developed now. We are still receiving submissions from our stakeholders and is not finalised yet.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- My question is on Article 8(2), which is on the arbitration of commercial infrastructure disputes. If there is a dispute among the two parties, that Article 8(2) does not allow any dispute resolution through a local or international court for arbitration. How will the Ministry of Public Works and Transport manage if a dispute arises

over this Australia-funded port development or infrastructure development or meteorological equipment development? How will the Ministry handle that when the Article says it cannot be taken to any local or international court for arbitration?

MR. P. BALEILEVUKA.- Because it relates to the dispute under this Treaty, that question needs to be addressed by the Office of the Solicitor-General. However, if we have actually developed a project, it will be governed by the general conditions of a contract, that will have conditions there referring to arbitrations and commonly used now is the Dispute Avoidance Adjudication Board - that is project-related. It has nothing to do with the Treaty.

If the money provided by Australia is focused on constructing a road, a building or a water supply project or building a wharf, that will come under a specific project contract, which will involve specifications, governing the quality of the project, and will govern the general condition of contract, as well as governing the relationship between the contractor and the client. In there, there will be a clause for variation, as well as for dispute. However, it has nothing to do with the Treaty.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Unfortunately, this afternoon, we are talking about the Treaty, and your Ministry has already indicated that you want to accent to the Treaty that is before us. I thank you for your explanation. It is noted and will help the Committee in our recommendation to Parliament.

HON. V. LAL.- I am looking at Article 7(4), which talks about developing and overseeing the framework. Does the Ministry have dedicated technical, meteorological and structural engineering expertise required to actively draft and defend Fiji's infrastructure priorities within the workplan? Do we have that capability to do it and to match with Australian standards?

MR. P. BALEILEVUKA.- We have the capacity to do project documentation in the Ministry. When I say Ministry, it covers the CSAs as well - WAF, FRA, LTA and MSAF. The response to that question, yes, we have the capacity to develop engineering design as well as project documentations.

HON. V. LAL.- Are we also reviewing whatever comes from Australia, the templates or their agreements, or are we just accepting it as it is, or we have people to go through it?

MR. P. BALEILEVUKA.- No, we do not just accept anything that comes from outside. When it comes to the Ministry, it has to be reviewed. It has to meet what we usually refer to as the PWD standards in terms of specifications. We are generally using the International Federation of Consulting Engineers (FIDIC) and General Conditions of Contract. What we receive must

also comply with it and it should also comply with the requirements of funding agencies, like World Bank and Asia Development Bank. They also do the review, whether it is coming in from Australia that is going to assist a project that is funded by the World Bank or the ADB, they have a requirement to review that as well.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- For Article 4(7), neither party shall act in a manner that would undermine the ability to meet any of the obligations pursuant to this Article. This question is relevant because I am going to talk about our ports. Your Ministry should have known that there is an AUKUS Treaty, which is a security treaty with the US and UK, supplying their technology to Australia as a hub. The plan for Australia is that by 2040, they will be manufacturing their own nuclear submarines. That is a 10-year plan. As the Ministry looked into how they would deal with that if arises, Australia needs to meet its other obligations with Fiji, so would Fiji be seeing nuclear submarines docking at our ports in time to come?

MR. P. BALEILEVUKA.- The Ministry does not have any response to that. If your question is related to whether we are going to construct ports, in fact, we are in the process of developing it. However, we have no response to whatever government that will be existing at that time that will accept nuclear vessels coming into Fiji. We have no response to that at this stage.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- The Treaty states that Australia will be bringing all their defence mechanisms to our shores and borders. I guess Fiji must be in a place where we must look ahead 10 years, 15 years, or 20 year,s of what is happening in the world, how geopolitics play, how global alliances are being formed so that we are in a better position. That is just a comment to that. We should be able to forecast rather than sitting there and waiting for the wave to hit us.

MR. P. BALEILEVUKA.- I am sure there is already. Also, that question should have gone to the Ministry of Defence. I am sure they have already looked into issues that you have raised here, and they would have some plans to protect the country against it.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- However, PS, as the Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, what I feel is missing is the input from various Ministries. We can throw it to the Office of the Solicitor-General, Ministry of Defence, but if Ministries would happily accept grants, where is the input? Everyone is passing the buck to the other, ‘‘Okay, he has a response’’, and that is why I see the lack of consultation done within the Ministries. As you have said, you were not part of it, and that makes the Committees work even harder, and probably we would have to extend this quite a bit longer until the next or the coming sitting.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- There is another question on Article 3. It talks about people's mobility. Under this Article 3, it promotes a greater mobility between the two countries, Fiji and Australia. Australia itself has major professional or technical workforce shortages. What guarantee do we have that deeper mobility under this Treaty will not accelerate the movement of our engineers and technicians away from Fiji to Australia, or would there be a discussion bilaterally with Australia to reinforce our human resource needs domestically?

MR. P. BALEILEVUKA.- Honourable Member, that is a multimillion-dollar question. We really cannot stop people from moving - it is a personal choice. We are having difficulty now getting experienced and qualified people to come back to PWD, even the operators. We are having really difficult times because there is a high demand for this expertise outside of Fiji as well. It is an individual choice for people to stay here or go for better pay or better condition of service.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Perhaps, something you can keep at the back of your mind, that Article 3 of the Treaty encourages people movement between the two countries. Maybe, in your negotiation as you move forward, you can seek clarification on that so that there can be some understanding between the two States.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- The whole idea of the Treaty is that we build a modern economy and a modern Fiji. My question is, PWD was back in the days, how do you justify that we have FRA, but we need PWD as well? If we want to match the Australian standards, obviously, the country needs to go forward. However, I see some people in general would bring back what was happening in the 1980s or 1970s. When will we build a modern Fiji and meet global standards?

Coming down to EFL, which we have seen on the ground, and this is in terms of framework regulations and operations. For example, if there is funding for provision of electricity to certain communities but the issue on ground is that the landowner is not satisfied, he needs some form of payment or he has to cut off the lines, with this Treaty entering into force, we have to respond to the Australians and say this is the ground issue – change the mindset. How are we going to change our mechanisms to ensure that the funding is there, but we want to build a modern Fiji, ensure that homes have electricity and water supply? What is going to change within the Ministry if there is a plan to further uplift, modernise, and ensure basic necessities are provided to the people?

MR. M. BELENA.- In terms of providing electricity services to the people, I think that is one of the key mandates of Government, to ensure that all the people are provided with better electricity services. In addressing those issues with regards to accessibility, especially dealing with land access, we work together with the relevant key stakeholders, the Provincial

Office, and with the landowners to provide consent for us to provide electricity services to the communities or to the individuals who are living within that piece of land.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- For example, under this Treaty, there is a funding to provide electricity for a certain community, but the landowners are not getting consent. What are your mitigation strategies?

MR. M. BELENA.- It depends on the type of project that we are planning to install, whether it is a generation project or looking at renewable energy generation. What the Government is doing right now with EFL, they are looking at addressing those kinds of issues - looking at cost sharing benefits with the resource owners, or even looking at maximising benefits to be provided to the resource owners to provide consent. I think the issue here is, how the resource owners can get equitable and fair benefit from the development that is happening on their piece of land.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Another question regarding EFL. We hear allegations that EFL makes it very hard for an investor to invest into electricity. They will offer very less and charge the maximum. We found that out with FSC as well, when we had the sugar report. As a Ministry, what plans are in place to tackle some of those issues that have arisen from EFL, or how have they been operating for decades?

No one forecasted an energy crisis, I guess, in the Pacific, but it has hit us hard. Fuel has gone up and electricity cost has gone up. Ordinary Fijians, all of us, feel the brunt of it. Are there plans? As I have said, the whole idea of Treaties' bilateral and multilateral cooperation is to build a modern economy and a modern society. Is there any work being done around that, where EFL actually starts to allow development, because funding will eventually be available and EFL cannot be that bottleneck when it comes to development of electricity in Fiji?

MR. M. BELENA.- What the Ministry has been doing at the moment is looking at reviewing legislations. We have actually carried out some legislative and regulatory gap analysis, identifying key areas that are hindering the participation of private investors or independent power producers in the energy sector. That exercise is currently ongoing, whereby we are going to review the existing legislation, which is the Electricity Act 2017. I think the key driver here is to try to get in more investors to come and set up renewable energy projects in Fiji. With that review, we are anticipating that it will address the key barriers that is preventing independent power producers from coming and investing in Fiji.

Secondly, with the EFL position as a private company, we understand where they are coming from in terms of trying to provide better services to the people. We have been dealing with investors quite frequently, but I think the bottom line is that we want to get in the genuine

investors. We do not want people just come and make a lot of noise, and the next day they are gone. We want to get in genuine investors who can provide long-term agreement with EFL in terms of power supply.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- PS, the partnership should build Fiji, but not a total dependency on the grants or what the Treaty is trying to bind the two States together. If Australian funding ceases, do we have the capacity to continue with our projected infrastructure development?

MR. P. BALEILEVUKA.- I think I mentioned that in my summary, that the Treaty should not be project-focused, but should be programme-focused. We have a programme that has started and whatever assistance is provided should cover the whole duration of the project.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Just on that line, PS, on knowledge transfer in your 10-Year Development Plan, would you have capacity building so that we can improve technical skills, the knowledge base and retain the experienced workers in our country?

MR. P. BALEILEVUKA.- Capacity building is a priority issue, especially when the Public Works Department was dissolved back in 2014 and when Government decided to revive PWD. The thinking was that we can just start from where we left off in 2014, then we move forward, but it was not. We lost the capacity and the knowledge during that time. It took us back to the 1970s and we have to rebuild that. The assistance provided through the Treaty and through other arrangements with funding agencies will really assist to build capacity again.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- PS, if you can highlight this climate resilient transport infrastructure, can you elaborate on that? One of the Ministry's proposed implementations from the support of the Treaty is climate resilient transport infrastructure.

MR. P. BALEILEVUKA.- The recent project is referred to as critical bridges and one component is the treatment of approach roads to strengthen it. Hopefully, when an earthquake or tremor strikes, it will not affect the bridge. This was something that was not considered in the previous bridge designs, but we have raised concerns in that regard. We are saying that instead of treating the approaches, we should design the bridge to be resilient – either we raise the bridge up, strengthen the piers, or we widen the spans to minimise obstructions in the river, so we have one span instead of a number of spans in the river. Those are some criteria relating to bridges.

In terms of road construction, we have increasingly experienced rising seawater level, so we are trying to move away from the foreshore when constructing roads. However, where we

have no other options, we try and build barriers that actually stops from damaging the road. These are some of the climate resilient components that is built into the project now.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- When we look at our national budget and the history of it, our gross deficit is increasing, yet it puts a lot of pressure on various Ministries to access funding. There is a treaty that we have - it has a 10-year workplan. What other means can your Ministry or is it currently accessing funds to maintain infrastructure, build new ones, knowing that with IMF, World Bank and ADB, they also have a limit to what they can give a particular country? Global competition is always high. How is your Ministry navigating through these tough times? What is the plan to ensure your Ministry continues to seek new sources of funding to ensure Fiji's infrastructure is intact?

MR. P. BALEILEVUKA.- It is a very important question, Deputy Chairperson. From the Ministry, we see transport infrastructure as the vehicle for economic growth. We do not want to be developing roads in isolation. We have to work with the Ministry of Agriculture. We still have a lot of empty land. We need to build roads where people can develop agriculture and increase the economic return of those roads.

Right now, we are just building roads to access villages. However, instead of just accessing villages, we should also build roads for the villages to access farms. It is just not the road to bring them to the urban centres; it is actually promoting the road to go to their farms as well. This is something that the Ministry is working with the FRA in the rural areas to provide access to the village, and we must ensure that that access is also provided to their farms so that it encourages them to go to the farms.

We are also discussing with the Ministry of Agriculture because we want to support agriculture development. There is still a lot of potential in agriculture. I remember back in the 1970s, most of our Permanent Secretaries are former Agriculture Officials, such as Mr. Charlie Walker, all those are all coming from agriculture and we support development. Whatever plans that they have, we move in to support. We build roads, cocoa roads, and we build roads to rice fields. We want to encourage that, to build and to increase the pie rather than try to share whatever little that we have.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- One last question to WAF. If you may inform the Committee what percentage of the country have access to clean drinking water? If you have that with you, or just a top of your head question.

MR. J. KOROILAVESAU.- Right now, we are at 97 percent of water access to all Fijians. This includes urban and rural water supply.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- What is the technology implemented to find out where water leaks or wastage are happening?

MR. J. KOROILAVESAU.- The Leak Detection Department within WAF has various sound technology instruments that we undertake on a periodic basis across our existing networks to identify leaks. At present, we have a new approach to identifying leaks through performance-based contract. We have signed a contractor who commenced last year, specifically for the Suva-Nausori. This is the first introduction of this approach to solving non-revenue water. Following the success of this programme, we will then mirror this across the country to other systems in Nadi, Lautoka and Labasa, as well as other smaller systems.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you, everyone, for availing yourselves today. I think a clear work plan and succession plan is imperative in going forward. I thank you for your presentation and your answers as well. We appreciate your time and cooperation, and we look forward to your continued engagement should the Committee require any further information.

On that note, honourable Members and Officials from the Ministry and CSAs, I declare this meeting closed.

The Committee meeting adjourned at 3.35 p.m.

Transparency and Integrity Fiji

[VERBATIM REPORT]

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

UNION/TREATY

(1) FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION
(2) OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE (VEITACINI TREATY)

ENTITY: Transparency and Integrity Fiji
VENUE: Big Committee Room (East Wing)
DATE: Fri day, 18th September, 2026

VERBATIM REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE HELD AT THE COMMITTEE ROOM (EAST WING), PARLIAMENT PRECINCTS, GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, ON FRIDAY, 18TH SEPTEMBER, 2026, AT 10.19 A.M.

Present

Hon. R.R. Sharma	-	Deputy Chairperson
Hon. V. Lal	-	Member
Hon. A.N. Tuicolo	-	Alternate Member
Hon. S. Kumar	-	Alternate Member

Apologies

Hon. L.S. Qereqeretabua	-	Chairperson
Hon. I. Tuiwailevu	-	Member
Hon T.R. Matasawalevu	-	Member

Interviewee/ Submittee: Transparency and Integrity Fiji In Attendance:

(1)	Ms. Paulina Rauca	-	Executive Director
(2)	Ms. Tarusila Raniu	-	Programme Officer
(3)	Mr. Sikeli Naketeca	-	Admin and Social Media Officer

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Honourable Members, Officials from Transparency and Integrity Fiji, members of the media and the public, dear viewers, ladies and gentlemen; *ni sa bula* and a very good morning to you all. It is my pleasure to welcome everyone present in this room, as well as those joining us via live broadcast.

At the outset, for information purposes, I wish to advise that pursuant to the Standing Orders of Parliament, specifically Standing Order 111, all Committee meetings are open to the public and the media. Accordingly, this submission meeting is open to the public and the members of the media.

However, should there be any sensitive information relating to this submission that cannot be disclosed publicly, such information may be provided to the Committee either in writing or in a closed session. This will only be permitted in limited circumstances, including matters relating to national security, third-party confidential information, personnel or human resource matters and Committee deliberation and development of Committee's recommendation and reports.

I wish to remind honourable Members and Officials from Transparency and Integrity Fiji that all comments and questions should be directed through the Chair. For viewers following this

meeting live on *Facebook*, questions may be submitted via the comments section. Please, note that only relevant questions will be considered by the Committee. Members of the Committee may interject during the submission or alternatively, questions will be raised at the conclusion of the presentation.

I further remind all present that this is a parliamentary proceeding. All information provided is protected under the Parliamentary Powers and Privileges Act and Standing Orders of Parliament. Slander or libel of any kind will not be condoned and all information presented to the Committee should be factual.

In terms of meeting protocols, movement within the meeting should be kept to a minimum. The usage of mobile phones is discouraged, and all mobile phones must be placed on silent mode for the duration of the meeting.

I will now introduce the Members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence.

(Introduction of Members of the Standing Committee)

Today, the Committee will receive an in-person submission from the Transparency and Integrity Fiji in relation to the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance or Veitacini Treaty, that are currently before the Committee.

I now invite the Officials present today to introduce themselves and proceed with their submission. You have 20 minutes for your opening statement and then we will have questions from the Committee members. Kindly note that microphones should be turned on before you speak and turned off immediately after you speak to avoid any disruption to the live submission. Please proceed, the floor is yours.

MS. P. RAUCA.- The Deputy Chairperson and Members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, a very good morning to you all. Before we proceed with our submission, I would like to thank the Standing Committee for giving us the opportunity to make our submission on the future Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance or Veitacini Treaty.

Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, before we proceed further, I would like to briefly introduce our organisation and the Team that is seated here this morning.

(Introduction of Transparency and Integrity Fiji Officials)

Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, our organisation, Transparency and Integrity Fiji, is a national chapter of Transparency International Global Movement, with over 100 chapters across the world that works to advance transparency, accountability and anti-corruption.

We are an independent, non-partisan organisation, dedicated to promoting transparency, accountability, good governance, and a culture of zero corruption in Fiji. Through advocacy, public education, policy engagement and oversight of integrity systems, our organisation works towards strengthening democratic institutions, safeguards public trust and ensures that governance frameworks serve the interests of all citizens.

Guided by these values, Transparency and Integrity Fiji welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty). Guided by our values, we approach this submission with a focus on transparency, accountability, public participation and the protection of Fiji's national interests, recognising the importance of these agreements in shaping the country's governance, development, regional cooperation and long-term prosperity. We, therefore, offer our observation and recommendation to support robust oversight, informed decision-making, and the effective implementation of these Treaties for the benefit of all Fijians.

To proceed with our submission, I will ask our Programme Officer, Tarusila, to provide the submission framework.

MS. T. RANIU.- Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members of the Parliamentary Standing Committee of Foreign Affairs and Defence, please, allow us to submit the following submissions based on our observations on the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance. Our submission will outline the four key thematic areas under the mandatory framework, which is the observation, corruption risks, integrity safeguards, and our recommendations.

With regards to Infrastructure and Climate Adaptation Vuvale Union, our observation is based on Article 4(2)(b) on Climate and Peace. It states, and I quote:

> ‘‘Engage third parties in their critical infrastructure and technology, and security sectors in a manner that honours the Pacific Way and protects and strengthens the Parties’ and the Pacific region's individual and collective security.’’

Now, the risks that comes with it is Fiji will be engaging with external countries, focusing on infrastructure, technology and security to provide services for critical infrastructure such as

ports, airports, telecommunication, electricity system, water supply, cyber security, defence, artificial intelligence and communication. There will be risks in the procurement processes, abuse of funds and fraud.

Going on to our second observation, which is on security and national crime, Article 4(4)(c) of the Vuvale Union, it states, and I quote: "action to address transnational crime and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing." The risk that comes with it is, law enforcement officials will be bribed by criminal groups, facilitation of illegal activities, procurement corruptions and money laundering through legitimate business.

With regards to health and human development, Article 3(4) of the Vuvale Union – Prosperity and People, states, and I quote:

> "The parties recognise that economic growth and security requires fiscal stability, resilient infrastructure, rules-based trade and investment, quality education and healthcare, gender quality and reliable supply chains."

Now, the risks that we have observed that comes along with it is, procurement and construction risks for equipment procurement, recruitment and selection risks regarding healthcare workers, donor funding risks which is the misuse of grants intended for HIV interventions, and confidentiality and integrity risks from the unauthorised disclosure of HIV status for personal gain and fraud.

With regards to digital transformation, Article 3(5) of the Vuvale Union - Prosperity and People, states, and I quote:

> "The parties recognise that the transition to a digital economy requires safe and secure digital infrastructure and systems."

We observed that the risks that come with it include risks of procurement fraud, procurement corruptions, misuse of public funds, and undue influence by vendors.

With education and people to people links under the same Vuvale Union, Article 3(4) and (6) - Prosperity and People, states and I quote:

> "(4) The parties recognise that economic growth and security require fiscal stability, resilient infrastructure, rules-based trade and investment, quality education and healthcare, gender equality and reliable supply chains."

(6) The Parties recognise that cultural linkages are built on our first nations heritage and multicultural and multifaith societies.''

We observed that the risks that come with it include favouritism or nepotism, procurement fraud and unfair allocation of opportunities.

With economic security, our observation is from Article 3(4), with the risks of misuse of public funds under bribery and fraud, market distortions, where contract may be awarded based on favouritism rather than merit, which reduces competition and efficiency, organized crimes and illicit finance, money laundering, tax evasion and illicit financial flaws.

To ensure a systematic, transparent and accountable approach, it is prudent for Government Ministries to establish and implement robust integrity safeguards that prevent the misuse of public funds, abuse of decision-making processes, and undue influence in procurement and project implementations. A key objective of such safeguards is to ensure that all decisions and expenditures are undertaken in the best interest of the people of Fiji, while also delivering meaningful benefits to a wider region.

Given that funding allocations will be channelled through relevant Government Ministries, followed by a competitive tender process to engage service providers to areas such as infrastructure, security, health, digital information, education and economic development, including market access initiatives, it is essential to determine whether adequate integrity safeguards are in place to guide these processes. These safeguards should promote transparency, accountability, fairness and value for money, while ensuring that allocated funds are utilised effectively, efficiently and strictly to their intended purposes. Strong oversight mechanisms are critical to mitigate corruption risks, prevent conflict of interest and maximise the developmental impact of public investments.

I will now handover to my colleague, who will speak on our recommendations.

MR. S. NAKETECA.- Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, given the submission and our observations on the risks identified by the organisation, these are our 10 recommendations that we would like to recommend to the Standing Committee:

(1) Strengthen the e-procurement framework and Procurement Office oversight mechanisms, including the timely publication of contract award information to enhance transparency, accountability, and public trust in procurement decisions.

(2) Require all public officials to submit mandatory and periodic declarations of assets, liabilities, and financial interests under strengthened disclosure framework, designed to enhance accountability, integrity and public trust in Government institutions.

Also, establish a comprehensive and mandatory asset and liability declaration system for all public officials involved in the oversight, management and implementation of the Vuvale Workplan. These declarations, honourable Members, should be submitted regularly, independently verified, and subject to compliance monitoring to promote transparency, prevent conflict of interest, and strengthen accountability throughout the implementation process.

(3) All foreign companies and local contractors participating in activities under the programme should be subject to a comprehensive due diligence process prior to their engagement. This should include verification of legal status, ownership structure, financial standing, past performance, integrity records, and any potential conflict of interest to ensure transparency, accountability, and compliance with applicable laws and standards.

(4) Implement a safe, confidential and easily accessible reporting framework across all Government Ministries with comprehensive whistleblower protections to safeguard individuals who report concerns regarding misconduct, corruption and breaches of integrity.

(5) Invest in modern border management technologies and smart screening systems to support border control officials in detecting suspicious movements, customs irregularities, persons of interest and other illicit activities at ports of entry. The adoption of these systems will improve risk-based enforcement, facilitate inter-agency coordination and strengthen overall border security and compliance.

(6) Implement a comprehensive beneficial ownership transparency framework under which all vendors and contractors are required to disclose their ownership structures and ultimate beneficial owners, with mandatory due diligence assessments conducted to validate disclosures and ensure compliance with integrity and accountability standards.

(7) Develop and enforce objective recruitment and selection criteria for health sector positions, ensuring that all appointments are conducted through a fair, competitive, and merit-based process.

(8) Enhance the monitoring and evaluation mechanism for all projects under the Vuvale Union through ongoing field oversight and scheduled site inspections, ensuring that project activities under this Union are effectively implemented, monitored and assessed against agreed targets and performance indicators.

(9) Allocate a dedicated funding for capacity building and professional development of public officials responsible for implementing the Vuvale Union. This should include targeted training, technical assistance, knowledge-sharing initiatives and skills development programmes to strengthen institutional capacity, enhance implementation effectiveness, and support the achievement of programme objectives.

(10) Mandate ethics, anti-bribery, anti-fraud and good governance training for all officers involved in the oversight and implementation of the Vuvale Partnership activities. This is to strengthen compliance, transparency and accountability.

Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, those are our recommendations submitted for your reference. Thank you.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you for the comprehensive submission you have made this morning. I think it is quite clearly stated with the recommendations that you have, not just regarding the Vuvale Union but the whole of Government approach – I have noticed that, but I think those are great points when it comes to the Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance.

I will now open the floor for questions and comments from honourable Members.

HON. V. LAL.- Deputy Chairperson, through you, I would like to thank Transparency and Integrity Fiji for their submission. I can see that you have given your submission in regard to what you have observed, your risks, the safeguards and recommendations, so thank you so much. This is going to help the Committee in formulating its recommendations to Parliament.

Transparency and Integrity Fiji's core values are integrity, democracy and rule of law, which is very important for Fiji and it is such an important organisation. In formulating the Treaties, were you consulted in the first place?

MS. P. RAUCA.- Thank you for your question. We were not consulted in terms of this Treaty. When the Australian High Commission were informed that we were making the submission, under the Good Governance Team, they came to sit and provided information in terms of this Treaty, so we were able to ask some of the questions that were related to this, and that is where we formulated our submission and which is why we are here today.

HON. V. LAL.- Just follow up on that, you were not consulted, they were approached and then you were told. So, I can see you have given your risks here.

MS. P. RAUCA.- Yes.

HON. V. LAL.- However, with regard to both, the Union and the Treaty, how are they going to affect the relationship between the two countries and development of Fiji?

MS. P. RAUCA.- In terms of that, looking at the Vuvale Union and the Veitacini Treaty, it is a very good Treaty because some of the areas, especially with the Articles from the Vuvale Union and the Veitacini Treaty covers all aspects, given that Fiji will be benefiting from this, especially with the dollar sign, provided in all other sectors.

The concern that we have is that when these funds go into the Government Ministries and how it is being utilised and how it trickles down to the community, that is our concern. For Australia, given that they have done the Treaty, they look at both sides. It is an advantage to both. If you read through the different Articles, especially with the Vuvale Union and the Veitacini Treaty.

Given that we have highlighted the risks, these are some of the areas that is of concern to us because if this money is being injected into the Government Ministries and it goes to different organisations, and it goes to different suppliers to implement these activities on the ground, that is the question. It will benefit us but reaching out to the grassroot, to the community, to the interest of the people, is questionable for us. That is why we have provided the risks, and we have also provided the recommendations to close those gaps. Thank you.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Yes, we definitely agree. Hearing from the various submittees that came before us, from their perspective, education was left out, because it talks about grants given to locals to go and study in Australia at local rates. Rather, it was asked, why cannot they come to Fiji and study here rather than getting people into the country. The other thing we found out, and which was a great contribution from honourable Aliki Bia was there has been no talks on youth and sports. This Treaty has seen more of a defense partnership, looking at some of how the geopolitics is at play.

Madam, what we have heard from the submittees is, the workplan is being drafted and that is in the process. We absolutely acknowledge the fact that when aid comes to Fiji, accountability and visibility. If we walk through the corridors of CWM Hospital, we must know that the $10 million that was granted, this is the first phase. Questions were also raised by the Committee on the previous support given by the Australian Government.

I would like to know from Transparency and Integrity Fiji and also for the public to know, what role do CSOs and NGOs play towards national governance? Consultation and dialogue is one

aspect or they say, 'the Pacific Way', but how much of the consultation and dialogue done with CSOs and NGOs is actually visible or is included and even materialised and funded by the Government at the end of the day? My question is, are consultations done just for the sake of it, or there are recommendations taken from CSOS and NGOs and are reflected towards nation building?

MS. P. RAUCA.- In terms of the consultation, yes, a lot of CSOs will be coming in to make submissions and provide consultation. I would say that given the process that it needs to, some would say it just has to tick the box in terms of consultation process, but to implement the submission that has been made is another question.

We are planning to have this consortium of CSOs to get together, have information sharing and just see how we can assist the Government in terms of our submission or for the National Development Plan.

A good example is the upcoming elections. For the elections period, one of the areas that CSOs have get together and agreed on is to have a domestic election observer group and we are planning to sign an MOU where we have the consortium to get together and assist each other in terms of observing the elections process. This is a way where all CSOs can sit, discuss and identify some of the areas in terms of governance and we can make submissions the next time when it comes to consultation. Thank you.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- The whole idea is to ensure that CSOs is well represented and is aligned with Government's national priorities or the National Development Plan. I have two questions, and I would like to break it down for you.

I am not talking about this Government but am talking about any government. At the end of the day, they need to do what needs to be done for their voters or their people. However, for CSOs, they are mostly run on donor funds, so they represent what their donor would stand for or what would be the ask. So, sometimes I feel like they are living in two different worlds and sometimes the level of scrutiny that will come at each other, which is sometimes visible on social media and on mainstream media. How do we close that gap between civil society and the Government at the end of the day?

MS. P. RAUCA.- With Transparency and Integrity Fiji, we have mentioned that the core values that we hold are on integrity, accountability and transparency, and also anything on good governance. For Transparency and Integrity Fiji and with every NGO, we have our strategic plan. So our strategic plan was launched early this year, and we have our five pillars to look into. With these five pillars, we align ourselves into the National Development Plan - not all, but some of it, especially on governance.

How do we bridge the gap between the Government and the community? We have come up with a plan to do advocacy with the community - advocating on the anti-corruption principle to villagers. With that, we are using the youth. We are training the youth, and we are providing information and knowledge for them to reach out to the communities in terms of this. Also, with the youth, they can carry information because they are our future generation.

Inclusive of that, we have seen that there is a high risk of corruption risks on procurement, given that a lot of funds is committed to that. Part of our plan is to do procurement research, to see which areas need to be identified, we conduct a risk assessment, and we provide recommendations in terms of that.

We also have plans to have our national integrity system implemented. I know it is quite ambitious, but that is the plan that we have, and it is a two-year plan.

Those are the plans that we have, especially for Transparency and Integrity Fiji. I cannot speak for the other NGOs, but it aligns to what is happening within the economy. With Transparency International – the global movement, they work with what we have put forth. They concentrate on advocacy, they have political integrity, but we see areas of concern within the economy, and then we put our plan forth for us to carry out over the two years. Thank you.

MS. T. RANIU.- Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, to add on to that, one of the main concerns here is data. If CSOs and Government need to work together, it is the data that we both have because with CSOs, they are the ones who are doing the groundwork. They have data from the grassroot level. Of course, we are all former civil servants. However, when we look at Government, we do not have data which they do have. So, if you see them barking at you, it is because of the data that they have.

Looking at our Government and our Ministries, we only have monitoring and evaluation since 2024, which is embedded into the Government Ministry. When we see CSOs, they have monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning with them ever since any NGO is established in the country. So, the only way that we can work together is through data. That is why one of our recommendations is to enhance your monitoring and evaluation mechanism.

In order to see that the project is initiated, from the starting right to the benefit and the impact of the grassroots, you need data. You need to revisit the places where you have your projects. You need to get data from the people to see the impact of the projects. You need to start and you need to end it in good terms because most of the data that CSOs are coming up with, as I have mentioned prior to this, is because they have the full data of the grassroot and they hear from the Government, the private sector, wherever it is, and they talk on it and they

see that these are the decision-makers and these are the laws, but this is the gap. It is because of the invariance of data that the Ministries are giving to the public. Whatever data that they have, it does not match with what the public has been told. So, one of the ways, I think, in which we can work together is just to strengthen the monitoring and evaluation process in each Department. That is the best mechanism I would suggest for now.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Just a quick question, with the data collected by all these CSOs, is there a way you channel it across to the Fiji Bureau of Statistics or is it just kept in silos?

MR. T. RANIU.- It is kept with the CSOs which is kept in their own database. You will see that with a single NGO; they have been mandated to work with women. For us, we are mandated to work with the youth. For the others, they are mandated to work with children. I think collaboration is another way, so instead of double dipping and wasting money on the same pond that this particular NGO has covered, why can we not collaborate and come to an understanding, sign an MOU, so that we know what is covered, what is left, which part does the Government have to complete that project that was started by an NGO or either way, started by the Government and completed by the NGO because they have various mandated work that they work with. So, probably, that will be another way - collaboration.

MR. S. NAKETECA.- Deputy Chairperson, I would like to add on to what Ms. Raniu had mentioned. You had mentioned that CSOs operate on donor funding. One thing I would like to highlight is that most CSOs work in areas where the weaknesses of the Government are, especially working with people on the ground. What the Government does not reach, CSOs do.

In terms of bridging that gap, as we were saying, between Government and CSOs, I believe the Government does not provide a way where CSOs and Government can collaborate, especially in sharing data. There is no such way that CSOs are willing to share data to give it to the Fiji Bureau of Statistics. However, if Government provides this pathway that NGOs and Government collaborate in things like that, I believe there would be no double dipping, as she has mentioned.

There is a weakness in having that pathway where NGOs and Government work together in terms of that because we have our own mandated areas of work. Most NGOs work in their own areas and we, particularly, target where the Government weakness is. There's a lack in having these two come together and having some sort of area in which we can share data, probably take it to the Fiji Bureau of Statistics, if needed. Yes, there is no such pathway to have these two work together. Thank you.

HON. A.N. TUICOLO.- Through you, Deputy Chairperson, in your submission, you highlighted the risk of favouritism and nepotism in higher education selection. I agree that this is a critical challenge facing our nation today. How can we prevent these issues from undermining the Vuvale Union?

MS. P. RAUCA.- Thank you for your question. As stated in one of our recommendations is to have strict criteria in terms of the selection of students that have to go through higher education. Secondly, to have a declaration of conflict of interest, especially for those who are in the recruitment and selection panel. They need to have a system in place for them to declare their conflict of interest, provide information in terms of their connection and step out from the selection process. That is one area that we can close this gap in terms of preventing favouritism and nepotism.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you for your great input. I absolutely agree that a pathway needs to be established because Government would conduct their own surveys by their own Ministries, there is a certain budget for it. We have challenges before us, and I think that collaboration is important between Government and CSOs.

On that note, I would like to thank Transparency and Integrity Fiji for availing yourselves today for this submission meeting. We appreciate your time and cooperation, and we look forward to your continued engagement should the Committee require any further information. *Vinaka*.

The Committee adjourned at 10.55 a.m.

Fiji Council of Social Services

[VERBATIM REPORT]

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

UNION/TREATY

(1) FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION
(2) OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE (VEITACINI TREATY)

ENTITY: Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS)
VENUE: Big Committee Room (East Wing)
DATE: Wednesday, 16th September, 2026

VERBATIM REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE HELD AT THE COMMITTEE ROOM (EAST WING), PARLIAMENT PRECINCTS, GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, ON WEDNESDAY, 16TH SEPTEMBER, 2026, AT 2.27 P.M.

Present

Hon. R.R. Sharma - Deputy Chairperson

Hon. V. Lal - Member

Hon. A. Bia - Alternate Member

Hon. A. Tuicolo - Alternate Member

Apologies

Hon. L.S. Qereqeretabua - Chairperson

Hon. I. Tuiwailevu - Member

Hon. T.R. Matasawalevu - Member

Hon. P.K. Ravunawa - Member

Submittee/Interviewee: Fiji Council of Social Services In Attendance:

(1)	Ms. Vani Catanasiga	-	Executive Director
(2)	Mr. Simeli Koroi	-	Board Member – FCOSS
(3)	Mr. Josaia Tukuni	-	Programme Manager

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Honourable Members, representatives from the Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS), members of the media and the public, dear viewers, ladies and gentlemen; a very good morning to you all. It is my pleasure to welcome everyone present in this room, as well as those joining us via live broadcast.

At the outset, for information purposes, I wish to advise that pursuant to the Standing Orders of Parliament, specifically Standing Order 111, all Committee meetings are open to the public and the media. Accordingly, this meeting is open to the public and the members of the media. However, should there be any sensitive information relating to this submission that cannot be disclosed publicly, such information may be provided to the Committee either in writing or in a closed session. This will only be permitted in limited circumstances, including matters relating to national security, third-party confidential information, personnel or human resource matters and Committee deliberation and development of Committee's recommendations and reports.

I wish to remind honourable Members and witnesses that all comments and questions should be directed through the Chair. For viewers following this meeting live on *Facebook*, questions may be submitted via the comment section. Please, note that only relevant questions will be considered by the Committee.

Members of the Committee may interject during the submission or, alternatively, questions will be raised at the conclusion of this presentation. I further remind all those present that this is a Parliamentary proceeding. All information provided is protected under the Parliamentary Powers and Privileges Act and the Standing Orders of Parliament. Slander or libel of any kind will not be condoned and all information presented to the Committee shall be factual.

In terms of meeting protocols, movement within the meeting room should be kept to a minimum. The usage of mobile phones is discouraged, and all mobile phones should be placed on silent for the duration of the meeting.

I will now introduce the honourable Members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence.

(Introduction of Committee Members and Secretariat)

Today, the Committee will receive an in-person submission from FCOSS in relation to the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance or Veitacini Treaty that are currently before the Committee. Despite being late by 10 minutes, the Committee will allow you to proceed by introducing yourselves individually. You have 25 minutes for your opening statement, and then we will have questions from honourable Members. Kindly note that microphones should be turned on before you speak and turned off immediately after speaking to avoid any disruption to the live submission. Please proceed, the floor is yours.

MS. V. CATANASIGA.- Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, I will begin first by apologising for our delay.

(Introduction of FCOSS Officials)

I thought I might start by quickly saying that our submission introduces the People's Resolution for Effective Development Cooperation, copies of which you have been furnished with. This is the framework that we have used to analyse the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union.

To provide the Standing Committee with a clear context on why this framework was selected, FCOSS highlights that these resolutions derived from Global Effective Development Commitments, like the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation and Istanbul Principles for CSO Development Effectiveness and informed by a year of intensive national and regional consultations, which we carried out in 2022.

These consultations were convened alongside the Pacific Islands Association of NGOs and the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness during the Development Effectiveness Week and related post-COVID-19 recovery initiatives. These activities gathered direct input from Fijian CSOs and social entrepreneurs and community leaders. Because development impacts are felt most acutely at the local level, FCOSS established through these activities five resolutions to serve as a grassroots-informed community-centred benchmark for assessing international development agreements.

MR. J. TUKUNI.- Deputy Chairperson, through you, the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union provides a framework for bilateral cooperation, and in evaluating the documents against the five resolutions that are before you, we will highlight the key structural strengths and gaps.

Resolution 1 - Institutionalisation of Mutual Accountability

We acknowledge that the Union establishes formal governance structure. At the ministerial level, we have the Vuvale Forum, as per Article 6(1), and the Senior Officials level - the Vuvale Bukmak, as per Article 7(1), to oversee implementation through a long-term Vuvale Union Workplan, as per Article 7(4). Both bodies mandate consensus-based decision-making grounded in the Pacific way, as per Articles 6(8) and 7(7). However, as a gap, the dispute resolution is limited entirely to internal diplomatic consensus, as per Article 8(1), and explicitly prohibits referral to external tribunals or courts, as per Article 8(2). Either party can unilaterally suspend obligations or terminate agreement, as per Articles 8(3) and 10(4), lacking independent third-party monitoring or public auditing to enforce accountability.

MR. S. KOROI.- Deputy Chairperson, may I continue.

Resolution 2 – Strengthen System-Wide Support for Communication and Information Sharing

We do acknowledge commitments in Articles 3(3)(b) and 3(5), which prioritise digital transition and safe digital infrastructure.

Articles 4(4)(d) and 4(6), explicitly protects critical infrastructure, technology and cyberspace, including Artificial Intelligence and quantum computing.

Article 5(2) establishes a physical Ocean of Peace Centre in Suva to facilitate regional dialogue. However, we do acknowledge gaps, which states that provisions focused heavily on State-level cybersecurity and critical infrastructure protection on Article 4(5), omitting specific commitments to invest in grassroots, human resources, civil society, communication tools or public information sharing channels.

MR. J. TUKUNI.-

Resolution 3 - Support the Strengthening of National Coordination Mechanism and Local System

The Treaty reaffirms the Pacific Islands Forum as the apex regional coordination body, as per Article 5(1)(a), and targets national system enhancement across security, policing, defence, border protection, healthcare and education. However, intergovernmental mechanism focuses on central government ministries.

As per Article 7(2), the text lacks specific operational channels or direct financial mechanism to build capacity within sub-national, municipal or local government system, which includes the communities that we serve.

MR. S. KOROI.-

Resolution 4 - Reinforce Family-Centred Approaches to Wellbeing and Resilience

We do acknowledge grounded in *vuvale*, which is a Fijian term for family, in Article 2. Article 3(1) anchors development in human dignity, while Article 4(4)(b) supports climate adaptation and mobility with dignity. Article 3 explicitly allows traditional, religious and community leaders to join sessions of the Vuvale Forum.

However, explicit reference to family welfare are limited to the overall Vuvale terminology. Wellbeing is largely addressed through high-level physical stability, macroeconomic growth and defence in Article 3(4) and Article 4(4) rather than family-centric social safety nets.

MR. J. TUKUNI.-

Resolution 5 - Creating a Clear Pathway for Social Enterprise and Women's Economic Engagement in Disaster Recovery

The Treaty explicitly identifies gender equality as a necessary component for economic growth and security in Article 3(4) and promotes inclusive development pathway to build lasting resilience against climate threats in Articles 3(1) and 4(2)(c).

However, the Treaty contains no explicit mention of social enterprises, microfinance initiatives or direct support mechanism targeting women-led community business during post-disaster economic recovery.

That is, honourable Members, our brief submission in relation to the five resolutions that we have provided to you. We thank you kindly for allowing us the privilege and the opportunity to appear before you. We will also provide soft copies of this submission to the Secretariat later on, for ease of reference into the Articles that we have mentioned as per resolutions.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you for your brief submission. I now open the floor for Members to ask questions, if they have any.

HON. V. LAL.- Looking at your submission, I can see that you as a civil society organisation representing people. In the first place, when the PS in the Office of the Prime Minister appeared, we asked about consultation and according to him, only certain Ministries were consulted, and I do not know whether there was input from CSOs. How do you look at it as a civil society organisation representing the people, were their views not taken? How do you feel about it?

MS. V. CATANASIGA.- I will admit that this is a pattern we see ongoing, particularly, with foreign affairs. I note that the White Paper was never consulted, and it was launched. This is an ongoing trend when it comes to development cooperation.

Nonetheless, we have done previous work on this. When there are opportunities that are denied to us at national level, because of our regional affiliations to the Pacific Islands Association of NGOs (PIANGO), we explore regional and international avenues that are available to us because of our affiliations to global CSO platforms, like HelpAge and others, we often use them sometimes when opportunities are closed to us at the national level.

We have just come back from the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting. There are opportunities that we often use as well on the side events to talk to leaders. However, we would appreciate that these opportunities are open to us at the national level in Fiji. We have also had the opportunity to share concerns directly to the Australian High Commissioner. We did say that there were no consultations done prior to this coming to you, honourable Members. It is a concern I would like to register with you as the relevant Committee.

HON. V. LAL.- So can I say that there was no input from your side when this initial Treaty was formulated?

MS. V. CATANASIGA.- Yes, that would be true. We were not consulted.

HON. A. BIA.- For the organisation, in terms of the resolutions that you have presented, I noticed that Resolution 5 discusses women empowerment. Looking at the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union, there is nowhere in the Article that specifically focusses on women empowerment. Would you like this to be included in the 10-Year Work plan so that it solely focusses on women empowerment?

MR. J. TUKUNI.- While it might have the absence of gender equality or the wording might be weak, we also acknowledge that there are inclusive terms that are used in the Article. In good faith, we hope that the pathway of the 10-Year Workplan will explicitly contain those that I have alluded to – social enterprise, microfinance and MSMEs in communities because these are mostly led by women.

We work in the informal sector and at some point, we acknowledge that our country is run by the informal sector in terms of economy. The informal economy is broad, and that is one of the gaps that we have identified. So, the Treaty, at least, in the Workplan, explicitly identifies how it supports the informal sector because most of those businesses are led by women in our communities.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- My question to you is, this Treaty talks about dialogue in the region, but it is a pity that there was not much dialogue and consultation within Fiji before signing this Treaty, which we gather from submittees. We are not making this up. I see a lot of emphasis is around the 'Pacific Way' of doing things. What is the 'Pacific Way' in your definition?

MS. V. CATANASIGA.- I really like that question. It is a conversation we often engage in as PIANGO Network because we find that sometimes, our Pacific terms are captured for political purposes, and it loses the essence of the values contained therein. In our conversation, we had to explain that *vuvale* means every member of the family - the child, the youth, the elderly. However, in some national settings, the child is excluded. You can take the proverbial meaning of that to say that sometimes, civil society organisations are the children in this setting. We are excluded from conversations.

One of the roles we can play to help ensure that the benefits of the Vuvale Treaty reach communities is to monitor the implementation. For us, it means that there are issues that we need to address, there are gaps in implementation, and we can address that directly instead of talking through the media. This is why it is important to ensure that we fully grasp the

understanding of *vuvale* in specific terms. It means that sometimes we have difficult conversations and, that is, have it face to face, straight, just as we are doing right now. That is something that is becoming harder to have in formal spaces.

We have urged the Australian Government to consider that civil society plays a part in this Vuvale Treaty because what we want to do is to see that the benefits of this Treaty is fully realised by all members of Fijian communities, and we have a role to play in that. For us, *vuvale* means everyone, even those you do not agree with, and a lot of that relationship should be based on dialogue. Dialogue does not mean, 'I agree with you', but dialogue means that I understand your perspective, but I may not necessarily agree with it.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- You are coming from the CSO's perspective, what gaps do you still see with national priorities, bilateral cooperation and assistance versus what NGOs and civil societies are doing? The goal is the same – to uplift the grassroots, fill in the sectors and the gaps. Do you see this as a continuing trend, or what could be done, rather, to solve this gap?

MS. V. CATANASIGA.- Deputy Chairperson, if I were to make it quite simple, the resolutions articulate what we see as needs. Mutual accountability is needed to be institutionalised. In this particular framework of the Treaty, we must ensure that there is mutual accountability, not only for Fiji, but also for Australia. I think they will appreciate that there is that arrangement, because I think that Australian taxpayers will want to know that this is going to be a good thing – the funds and the support that they are availing.

Our suggestion to strengthen systems-wide support for communication and information sharing is related to the experience that communities have had in terms of the siloed approaches, where rural and remote communities have had to go to several different agencies to get the support that they need. The FCOSS has been advocating for access to Information Bill 2026, which is currently sitting before Parliament and has not been passed.

Access to information is critical for frontline communities. If they do not have information on services, they will not be able to recover after a disaster that hits them. Our need to support the strengthening of national coordination mechanisms and local systems because sometimes, development cooperation can undermine coordination mechanisms. It can undermine local systems. These are the actual needs that have been put forward in the 2022 consultations that I referred to earlier on.

One of the things that we have consistently talked about, particularly relating to the PALM Scheme, is family-centred approaches to the PALM Scheme because it is about wellbeing and resilience. We have recorded concerns at the National Employment Centre Board proceedings about workers leaving behind their children to the care of grandparents, and sometimes there

is a disconnect in the communication, so they are not receiving support. If there are development cooperation agreements, we have to ensure that we are protecting Fijian families. That is why it is our fourth resolution.

We have seen the connection between making sure that social enterprise support women's engagement in disaster recovery because we have seen that communities that have been impacted by crises, if they have women's enterprises in those communities, they recover fast. We need to be supporting women's enterprises because they help the community to rebound after a disaster. That is why the five resolutions are before you, so that you would consider as the priorities coming from communities that we have consulted with.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Ms. Catanasiga, how does a woman's enterprise recover faster compared to a youth-led enterprise or belonging to basically a man?

MS. V. CATANASIGA.- We consulted with women enterprises in the Western Division. We had a representative from the Pacific Islands Private Sector Organisation (PIPSO) at the national level, we documented stories from women, and most of the families that they come from, depend on them solely.

When we were coming out of COVID-19, we did this roundtable and we found that communities often relied on women. They also had roles to play in the leadership of the community. They do not only run canteens, but they are also the head of women's group in that community. As they worked on their own businesses, they were also trying to support their communities to recover, so they were encouraging youth to go back to farming post-disaster.

We found that the misconception in both, climate and disaster spaces, is that women had been badly affected and they are the ones who may need extra support in terms of psychosocial support. However, we found a different scenario when we work in communities. We find that it is the women that rebound faster because they have to put food on the table, they have to prepare the children for school, so they are the ones who often call on external support to help their communities recover. They do that either through their businesses or through their own networks – faith networks, social networks and NGO networks. That is what they use to try and ensure that their communities recover after a crisis.

HON. V. LAL.- My question is in regard to the mobility clause. Ms. Catanasiga, we have concerns that a lot of our people and technical experts are already in Australia – teachers and nurses. There are provisions where a substantial amount of money is kept aside for our

people to go and study in Australian universities. Our concern is there is a lot of brain drain. What is your concern as a CSO? How do you feel about that?

MS. V. CATANASIGA.- We have also noticed that in the civil society sector. For a while, we did not feel the impact of brain drain, but we are beginning to see that, particularly, in highly technical areas. Finance management, for example, is one area where we often have a high turnover. We have people who have migrated. Many of those who work in the civil society sector, work there because there is passion. There is that connection to Fiji.

I think that we have not really tapped on this. People remain in Fiji because they feel a sense of loyalty to the country, their families and relatives. We have to ensure that we speak to them at that level. Sometimes, we are speaking to them at head level, we are not speaking to the heart.

When you look at the reforms that are currently taking place in Fiji, we hope that that works to enable the space for young professionals to rise up in the ranks. People leave when they do not see a future that ensures their security, for themselves and their families. Having engaged closely with the various reforms taking place across the various sectors, I believe that that is already taking place, but there is not enough messaging that is appealing to young people. That is coupled with, sometimes, the decisions that governments make - the appointment of particular people with this level of reputational risk that tells the young people or signals to the young people that this country's heading in a different direction.

We have to make sure that what we do and what we are messaging is connecting. There is a level of inconsistency that sometimes impacts on the morale. That is beyond us, and I think that is an area that Government must explore. They must be very intentional with their messaging and their communication, and leaders have to demonstrate that.

HON. A. BIA.- Ms. Catanasiga, my question is in regard to your observation or your assessment when you mentioned that dialogue and communication is very vital, especially for the Treaty, or any other initiatives that concern the people. What is your assessment in terms of the link that is there? From my own observation as one of the new Members of Parliament, it is like we are standing on a river. We are on this side, NGOs and CSOs are on the other side. However, the common denominator here is the people.

What is your assessment in terms of the relationship that is there, communication-wise and dialogue-wise? If the common denominator is the people, what is your assessment in terms of this relationship between CSOs, NGOs and Government or politicians who are represented in Parliament? I believe, if the common denominator is the people, there needs to be a consensus somewhere that we need to work towards a common goal and, that is, to uplift the

standard of the very grassroots that are there in the communities and in the villages that you do visit.

MS. V. CATANASIGA.- I agree with you that sometimes, our advocacy may seem like we are standing from the other side. I want to assure you that the Fiji civil society sector is very much pro the people of Fiji. We may have different ways of articulating it, but the best way to gauge our support for leadership is when a disaster occurs. When you call, we will come, and sometimes we turn up without the resources at first.

However, we understand that your leadership or the leadership of those who are currently in positions of authority must be respected, particularly, during those times. Sometimes our advocacy is misinterpreted, that we are anti-Fiji, but we are not. We could consider that we do that because we want to add value to the work that you do as government.

Often as NGOs, when we make submissions for funders, they ask us, how does your plan support the National Development Plan, and we have to demonstrate that. Government also has the opportunity to talk directly to our donors, to tell them that we should work together closely. There have been opportunities like that in the past. We will not apologise, I ask for your forgiveness, honourable Bia, I will not apologise on behalf of the sector, I will say that we will continue to do that because we want to enhance your work.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you. All the points are well noted. I think what we see in our society is a lot of people want to speak the truth. A lot of people want to bring in change, but I think there is a manner in the way you raise matters. What we see a lot of on social media is just trying to assassinate someone's character and not sticking to the issue but getting personal. I am glad you have taken your stand.

We have heard all the five resolutions. You have spoken about reforms, changes, and change is so uncomfortable to many. We all want growth, but no one wants to change. It will take a whole of society's mindset to change in order for the kind of leaders they choose the kind of choices they choose to debate on, how they want to spend their time and in going forward.

Lastly, our nation requires around $4 billion per year to function, and this is a $1.5 billion grant. If you divide it into 10, it is $150 million per year. In my opinion, I would say it is quite less, and that is probably why we need a very clear workplan and as much contribution from your end and various stakeholders into ensuring where we can quickly fill in the gaps and then, of course, the funds that come from the CSOs, the funds that come from the national budget, to uplift the lives of our people.

On that note, I thank the representatives present today for availing themselves for this submission. We appreciate your time and cooperation, and we look forward to your continued engagement should the Committee require any further information.

On that note, honourable Members and submittees, I declare this meeting closed. *Vinaka*.

The Committee meeting adjourned at 3.00 p.m.

Ministry of Education

[VERBATIM REPORT]

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

UNION/TREATY

(1) FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION
(2) OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE (VEITACINI TREATY)

ENTITY: Ministry of Education
VENUE: Big Committee Room (East Wing)
DATE: Tuesday, 15th September, 2026

VERBATIM REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE HELD AT THE COMMITTEE ROOM (EAST WING), PARLIAMENT PRECINCTS, GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, ON TUESDAY, 15TH SEPTEMBER, 2026 AT 3.05 P.M.

Present:

Hon. R.R. Sharma - Deputy Chairperson

Hon. V. Lal - Member

Hon. A. Bia - Alternate Member Hon.

A.N. Tuicolo - Alternate Member

Apologies:

Hon. L.S. Qereqeretabua - Chairperson

Hon. I. Tuiwailevu - Member Hon. T.R. Matasawalevu - Member

Hon. P.K. Ravunawa - Member

Interviewee/Submittee: Ministry of Education

In Attendance:

(1) Mr. Navin Raj - Permanent Secretary
(2) Mr. Dharmesh Raman - Senior Curriculum Specialist (TVET)
(3) Mr. Vilitati Togavou - Manager e-Learning Department
(4) Mr. Isoa Tauribau - Director TVET

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Honourable Members, representatives from the Ministry of Education, members of the media and the public, dear viewers, ladies and gentlemen; a very good evening to you all. It is my pleasure to welcome everyone present in this room, as well as those joining us live via broadcast.

At the outset, for information purposes, I wish to advise that pursuant to the Standing Orders of Parliament, specifically Standing Order 111, all Committee meetings are open to the public and the media. Accordingly, this meeting is open to the public and members of the media. However, should there be any sensitive information relating to this submission that cannot be disclosed publicly, such information may be provided to the Committee either in writing or in a closed session. This will only be permitted in limited circumstances, such as matters relating to national security, third-party confidential information, personnel or human resource matters and Committee deliberations and development of Committee's recommendation and reports.

I wish to remind honourable Members and witnesses that all comments and questions should be directed through the Chair. For viewers following this meeting live on *Facebook*, questions may be submitted via the comment section. Please, note that only relevant questions will be considered by the Committee. Members of the Committee may interject during the submission. Alternatively, questions will be raised at the conclusion of this presentation.

I further remind all present that this is a parliamentary proceeding. All information is protected under the Parliamentary Powers and Privileges Act and the Standing Orders of Parliament. Slander or libel of any kind will not be condoned and all information presented to the Committee should be factual.

In terms of meeting protocols, movement within the meeting should be kept to a minimum. The usage of mobile phones is discouraged, and all mobile phones must be placed on silent for the duration of the meeting.

I will now introduce the Members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence.

(Introduction of Committee Members and Secretariat)

Today, the Committee will receive an in-person submission from the Ministry of Education in relation to the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance or Veitacini Treaty, currently before the Committee.

I now invite the representatives present today to introduce themselves and proceed with their submission. You have 15 minutes to 20 minutes for your opening statement and then we will have questions from honourable Committee Members. Kindly note that the microphone should be turned on before you speak and turned off immediately after speaking to avoid any disruption to the live submission. Please proceed, the floor is yours.

MR. N. RAJ.- Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, thank you for having us this morning.

(Introduction of Ministry of Education Officials)

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to provide the Ministry of Education submission on the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance or Veitacini Treaty. The

Ministry supports the Treaties insofar as they relate to our mandate and responsibilities. We recognise that the Vuvale Union is intended to strengthen Fiji-Australia cooperation across prosperity, resilience, people-to-people connections, climate security and peace, while the Veitacini Treaty is principally concerned with the mutual defence and security.

For the Ministry of Education, our primary consideration is how do we translate these commitments into practical outcomes for Fiji's learners, teachers, education institutions and future workforce? This is the perspective from which we approach the Treaties. If I can break it down into parts, as follows:

(1) Ministry's Role and the Relevance of the Vuvale Union

The Ministry was briefed on the Treaties during the Australian Government engagement with Fiji in May 2026. The education commitments have deliberately been maintained at a high level, which is appropriate for treaty-level discussions, with detailed implementation arrangements to be developed collaboratively between Fiji and Australia and involving relevant Ministries and stakeholders. This is important because we see the Treaty as providing a strategic framework, rather than replacing existing education programmes or creating a separate education system.

The Ministry's role, therefore, will be to ensure that education and human capital priorities are properly reflected when the detailed implementation arrangements and the proposed 10-Year Workplan are developed. We also anticipate that the Ministry of Education will have an appropriate role in the Vuvale Forum and the Vuvale Bukmak, particularly, when matters relating to education, skills, human capital and young people are considered.

(2) Key Treaty Provisions Relevant to Education

The provision that is most directly relevant to the Ministry is Article 3 – Prosperity and People. The Treaty recognises that economic growth and security require, among other things, quality education and healthcare, resilient infrastructure, gender equality and reliable supply chains. It also identifies the transition to a digital economy, cultural and people linkages and mobility, as important areas of cooperation.

From an education perspective, these commitments are significant. Education is the mechanism through which we prepare our young people to participate in the digital economy, enter the workforce, pursue further education and contribute to Fiji's economic and social development. For example, when the Treaty speaks about –

- mobility, we see a direct connection with education to skills and to employment pathways.
- digital transformation, we see opportunities to strengthen digital literacy, ICT capability, responsible use of Artificial Intelligence, cyber security awareness and digital learning.
- cultural and people linkages, we see opportunities to strengthen cultural knowledge, language, heritage and connections between Fijian and Australian institutions and communities.

The Treaty also recognises the importance of safe and secure digital infrastructure. This will become increasingly important for the education sector as digital systems, students' information systems, online learning and emerging technologies expand.

Article 4 on Climate and Peace is also relevant to the Ministry. Fiji's education system must be resilient to climate-related disruptions. Schools play a pivotal role in our local communities. For instance, schools are also evacuation centres during times of natural disasters. Thus, we need to ensure that schools have climate-resilient infrastructure. Our schools and education institutions have an important role to play in climate literacy, disaster preparedness, continuity of learning and building resilience within our communities.

(3) Existing Fiji-Australia Education

What do we have currently? There is already a strong foundation upon which the Vuvale Union can build. Australia is Fiji's longstanding and largest development partner in education, supporting early childhood, primary and secondary education, tertiary study and skills development. One example is the Australia-Fiji Education Programme (AFEP), valued at approximately around AUD25 million. AFEP works closely with the Ministry to strengthen literacy and numeracy through teaching, learning and leadership, while also incorporating gender equality, disability inclusion, climate resilience, sustainability and localisation.

Another important example is Pacific Australia Skills, which is a regional programme, valued at approximately AUD229.5 million. It supports skills system strengthening and quality training for employment, including foundational employment skills, construction, agriculture, youth work and counselling, digital skills and maritime skills.

Under the Vuvale Union Pacific Australia Skills, we work collaboratively with the Fiji Government and Fijian and Australian TVET partners to support an uplift in digital and maritime skills.

We also have the Australian Awards, which provides another important pathway for Fijians to access tertiary education. Since 2012, more than 700 scholarships have been awarded to Fijians for Masters, Bachelors, Diplomas and Certificate level to study in Australia and the Pacific. The Ministry, therefore, sees the Vuvale Union as an opportunity to connect, strengthen and scale up existing cooperation rather than establish fragmented or parallel programmes.

(4) New Education Opportunities

There are two proposed initiatives under the 10-year Work Plan that are particularly significant for education.

(a) Access to Australian Tertiary Education

The proposal is for selected Fijian students to access Australian educational facilities at domestic equivalent rates through co-funded arrangements, expected to be commencing around 2029-2030. The indicative commitment is AUD29.5 million. This is potentially transformative because domestic equivalent fees would represent a significant reduction, compared with the fees normally charged to international students in Australia.

From Fiji's perspective, however, the objective should go beyond simply increasing the number of students studying overseas. We should ensure the access is connected to national skills priorities and future workforce requirements, so that the investment contributes to Fiji's human capital development.

(b) TVET Centres of Excellence

The second major initiative is the establishment of a TVET Regional Centre of Excellence, initially focused on foundational digital skills with potential for a second centre focussing on maritime skills. This is particularly relevant because

Fiji's economy is changing and the skills required by employers are also changing.

A strong TVET system can provide pathways from education into employment, and support economic diversification. For example, digital skills are increasingly relevant across government, business, tourism, financial services, education and other sectors, while maritime skills have a particular

relevance to Fiji's geography and the wider Pacific. The Ministry, therefore, sees these centres as an opportunity to strengthen not only Fiji's TVET system, but potentially regional Pacific skills capacity.

(5) Anticipated Benefits

Anticipated benefits that we can relate to as Ministry of Education include:

- expanded access to Australian tertiary education for our selected Fijian students;
- improved digital and maritime skills capacity through TVET cooperation;
- stronger circular mobility and clearer pathways from education to skills to employment;
- continued improvement in literacy, numeracy, teaching, learning and educational leadership through existing cooperation such as AFEP;
- greater access to scholarships;
- tertiary study and professional development;
- stronger cultural, people-to-people and institutional linkages;
- potential strengthening of Pacific regional education capacity;
- opportunities for joint research, innovation, digital education and emerging technology cooperation;
- opportunities to strengthen climate resilient education; disaster preparedness and continuity of learning; and
- education can contribute to youth development, peace, democratic values and social cohesion.

(6) Implementation Requirements

Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, these opportunities will require careful implementation. For domestic equivalent fee initiatives, significant legislative and regulatory changes in Australia will be required and the initiative is anticipated to come online around 2029-2030. Australia will also work with Fiji to determine the funding arrangements, including consultation with stakeholders such as TSLS.

From Fiji's side, there will need to be clear arrangements concerning the following:

- eligibility and student selection;
- funding and student support;
- qualification recognition and portability where relevant;
- coordination between the Ministry, TSLS and other agencies; and
- alignment with Fiji's national skills and human capital priorities.

For TVET Centres, the location, institutional structure and governance will need to be developed collaboratively by Fiji and Australia. We will also need to consider ownership, accountability, staffing, infrastructure, ICT requirements and long-term operating costs. Because education is increasingly digital, we will need to

have appropriate arrangements for data sharing, privacy, student information and cyber security.

(7) Financial and Resource Implications

The Ministry recognises that resource implications cannot be considered only in terms of initial investment - we also need to consider the full life cycle costs of these initiatives. For example:

- With TVET Centres, this includes not only establishing the facilities, but also staffing equipment, ICT infrastructure, maintenance utilities, curriculum development and recurrent operational costs.
- For student mobility, we need to consider tuition arrangements, student support and other associated costs.
- We also need resources for monitoring, evaluation, reporting, technical assistance and capacity building.

The Ministry, therefore, recommends that educational initiatives are properly reflected in the relevant annual budget processes, and that multi-year commitments and responsibilities are clearly established before Fiji assumes significant new recurrent obligations.

(8) Key Risks and Challenges

We also want to draw the Committee's attention to several risks:

(i) **Long-term sustainability and ownership of TVET Centres**

We need to establish, from the outset, who will own, govern, finance and maintain the centres and what happens when the initial external funding period ends.

(ii) **Alignment**

The centres must respond to Fiji's actual workforce and industry needs. Their scope and focus should, therefore, be developed jointly with relevant Government agencies, industries and TVET stakeholders.

(iii) **Funding**

We should avoid creating new recurrent obligations for Fiji without clearly established financial arrangements.

(iv) **Equity**

The tertiary opportunity will necessarily involve selection of students. We, therefore, need transparent criteria and balanced academic merit, equity and Fiji's national skills priorities.

(v) **Duplication**

We already have a number of Australia-supported education and skills initiatives. The Vuvale Union should help us better coordinate these investments rather than creating separate structures that operate independently.

(vi) **Digital Safety**

This is cyber security and data protection, which I have been alluding to in my earlier speech. As digital education expands, we must ensure that systems are secure and that students and institutional information is properly protected.

(vii) **Skills Retention**

This is a challenge for our country. As for the Ministry, monthly, our teachers are leaving the system.

(viii) **Circular Mobility**

This provides significant opportunities for Fijians, but we should also ensure that mobility contributes to Fiji's workforce needs and does not, unintentionally, deepen shortages in critical occupations.

(ix) **10-Year Workplan**

This is why the Ministry considers the proposed 10-year Workplan particularly important. We recommend that education and human capital development, therefore, be clearly reflected in that Workplan. For each major education initiative, we would like to see a clearly defined outcome, responsible agency, implementation timelines, financing arrangements, measurable indicators, monitoring and reporting arrangements, and clear risk management measures.

(x) **Education Relevance and the Veitacini Treaty**

In relation to the Veitacini Treaty, the Ministry recognises that this is principally a mutual defence and security Treaty. Its purpose is to protect the sovereignty, secure mutual defence and security interests and contribute to the stability and security in the Pacific.

The Treaty includes provisions concerning democratic values, peaceful settlement of disputes, cooperation, consultation, mutual defence and governance. However, education has a supporting role in the broader perspectives of peace and security. This could include peace and civic education, strengthening learners' understanding of democratic values, peaceful dispute resolution, respect and responsible citizenship.

There are also opportunities for youth leadership and regional understanding, particularly in strengthening connections between young people across Fiji, Australia and the Pacific. Research and education institutions may also contribute where appropriate through research and knowledge, exchange on peace, resilience, climate security and regional priorities.

As digital technology becomes increasingly important to our society, education can also support responsible digital citizenship and cyber awareness. There may be opportunities for education and training institutions to contribute to broader resilience and regional capacity building.

In conclusion, the Ministry of Education supports the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and recognises the opportunity it presents for the education and human capital development sector. We see the Treaty as an opportunity to build on already strong educational partnership, to connect existing cooperation within Fiji's longer-term national priorities.

The opportunity before us is significant. It includes expanding tertiary opportunities for Fijian students; strengthening TVET; building digital and maritime skills; improving education to employment pathways; strengthening literacy and numeracy; supporting teachers and educational leaders; expanding scholarships and professional development; and creating opportunities for research, innovation and regional cooperation. At the same time, we believe that implementation must be carefully planned, properly resourced and sustainable.

Therefore, our recommendation is that education and human capital development be clearly incorporated into the Vuvale Union's 10-year Workplan, with clear outcomes, responsibilities, timelines, financing arrangements, monitoring indicators and accountability mechanisms. We also recommend appropriate participation at the Ministry in the Vuvale Forum and Vuvale Bukmak, when education, skills, human capital and youth matters are discussed.

Ultimately, the success of the Vuvale Union should not only be measured by the strength of the relationship between the two Governments, it should also be measured by what that relationship delivers for the people of this country. For the Ministry of Education, that means better opportunities for our learners, stronger support for our teachers, more responsive skill

systems, greater access to tertiary education, stronger human capital, and young Fijians who are better prepared to contribute to Fiji and the wider Pacific.

The Ministry supports the Treaties and looks forward to working with relevant Government agencies and the Australian Government, to ensure that commitments relating to education are translated into practical, measurable and sustainable outcomes for Fiji.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you, PS, for the submission. Was your Ministry consulted for this Treaty? If yes, how rigorous was the consultation process?

MR. N. RAJ.- Yes, the Ministry was consulted. Our honourable Minister for Education was involved in the discussion with the Australian Government in May, as I had delivered in my speech.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- With this 10-year Plan, does the Ministry have a 10-year plan when it comes to this Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union?

MR. N. RAJ.- We have our own 10-year Education Sector Plan. We have our own Strategic Plan and Annual plan. I gather this is still a work in progress, and we need to do a lot of alignment because the implementation, discussion and consultation will be critical here.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- That is why the Committee is scrutinising this and holding consultations to hear the plans from the various submittees because it is very broad, it talks about prosperity, people, links, mobility, technology and critical infrastructure, which is school buildings, et cetera.

You mentioned, "for local Fijians to access education at domestic rates in Australia". Why can we not have the opposite – have Australian standards of education in Fiji and rather, have Australians or more people from the region come to Fiji, get their skills upgraded in Fiji, learn in Fiji, and Fiji attract people to come and study here rather than sending our people to Australia?

MR. N. RAJ.- That is a very encouraging thought. We would like to see us, as a country, benchmarking with our international partners and our neighbours. However, as per this submission, what we gather is, this is a space where our children who would like to access education in Australia, can be given subsidies in terms of their fees. For international students studying abroad, they are paying heavy fees. However, in this matter here, what I gather from our development partners as work-in-progress continues is if our students are able to support themselves moving abroad, they will be paying a fee which is subsidised comparatively to the

normal citizens of Australia. However, questions arise if these children go, then who will handle the cost of their accommodation, their living, et cetera. There is a lot of moving parts, and I think that is why more consultation and discussion needs to progress so that we can see the way forward.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- What I gathered from current students who are on TSLS and who come from other places to Suva is that they have the same issue – ability to afford food, rent, the condition of the places that they are renting, and the assistance that they are getting under the loan scheme, which is just not enough. Is Fiji forecasting in terms of education standards? One of the critical roles played is by the teachers. Are we going to see the rise in the salary of our teachers as we see how well teachers are paid in Australia?

As a personal opinion, I think teachers and nurses should be one of the highest paid in the country because they look out for the sick, they look out for the children. I will tell you, very clear cut, it is the pay and that is why many teachers leave. The conditions are secondary. Is there any work being done in your 10-year Plan, and under Vuvale is that a consideration by your Ministry?

MR. N. RAJ.- That is well noted. Ideally, I would like to see the welfare of our teachers well looked after so they do not have to move. Basically, for greener pastures and for better conditions, teachers do move, as we are not able to, perhaps, competitively meet their salary and wages, and remuneration. I would like to see a world in the future where Fiji can sustain our teachers with that kind of remuneration. Thank you for that thought. This is what I will be discussing also in this 10year Sector Plan, how this partnership can be encouraged in that space.

HON. A. BIA.- Thank you for the thorough presentation from the Ministry of Education. Just throwing this idea out there, by way of background, the Vuvale started as a partnership way back in the previous government. Last year, on the visit by the honourable Prime Minister, he suggested to the Australian Government to elevate the partnership into a treaty so that we see the practical expressions of this partnership on the ground.

Taking that idea and the submissions that you have made today, looking at the risks, advantages and the opportunities that are there so that we can benefit directly or practically on the ground in terms of elevating our education system, would it be fair to suggest to the Committee or, perhaps, one of our suggestions is to have it as one of the Articles so that we see practical solutions on the ground? Rather than having majority of the agreements that you have already in terms of education partnership with Australia, do you think that it is fair to have it as one of the Articles so that we see it practically moving on the ground?

MR. N. RAJ.- A very good question and a very good point noted. I think, if you would like to see outcomes, how can we strengthen this Vuvale partnership? As far as Ministry of Education, for instance, we would like to see how this union encourages digital learning space, climate resilient education and AI space embedded into our curriculum, how we can strengthen what we know and how we grow in this space.

TVET, for instance, is a very strong area for our country. We have two officers representing our TVET Section and we can venture in so many pathways in that regard. The sad thing is, when we train our children, we educate them and then they choose to leave, we have the challenge to keep replacing them. Perhaps, with this partnership, I will be able to do some more consultation and see where we can strengthen this area.

HON. A. BIA.- Just by going through the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union, there is no direct impact - that it directly states the benefit for education. You have stated that you want to include it in your 10-year plan, why not suggest that it be included as one of the Articles in the Treaty that focusses on education and human development?

MR. N. RAJ.- Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, maybe the Government can look into that as well at your level where we can strengthen these legislations.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- I would like to add on to that. I think what honourable Bia has raised is a very important point because, PS, you alluded that the honourable Minister was involved in the consultation process. The Minister is one aspect. Having the PS and the Technical Team is an added opportunity because it is the Technical Team on the ground that would know how it rolls out, and this is from the Executive.

You said that consultation was done. If there is absolute priority for education to prosper in terms of looking at how our economy is and how it has to grow in the 10 years, I think nothing is being said about education. The scope is so broad. That is why it is critical that what you are telling us now should have been done at the negotiation stages. However, the inclusion of the Article that directly mentions education has been well raised by honourable Bia and you as well. I guess that is well noted but should have been during the consultation period. PS, were you part of the consultation?

MR. N. RAJ.- Unfortunately, no. However, I am in talks with the DFAT Representative, the Australian Government representatives, who are very important stakeholders. They have been mentioning that more consultation and dialogue needs to be between us and them, to see how we move forward with this Union.

HON. V. LAL.- PS, you have spoken about a wide range of issues, and you have also told us that you have been briefed by your Australian counterparts in regard to this. You also raised some key risks. Did you raise these risks which you have mentioned to us, in terms of TVET - who owns it, funding and all that, with the chief negotiator, in our case, the PS in the Office of the Prime Minister? Did you raise that these are some of the key risks which we will face when we go forward with this?

MR. N. RAJ.- An honest response is that during that consultation or during the discussion, I was not part of it. However, moving forward, I have talked to my Australian counterparts on how well our issues can be linked and synergised, through this Union, that benefits the Ministry of Education.

What I gather from the team is, there is a general substance of how things are at the moment, but the detailed implementation will follow later on, upon detailed consultation and, as alluded by the Deputy Chairperson, working with the people on the ground, working with the Permanent Secretary, working with the Directors and Managers of their respective departments, to see what is best for the Ministry of Education.

HON. V. LAL.- Does this mean that once we accede to this, Australia is going to provide direct budgetary support or structural development grants to primary and secondary school infrastructure? Are they going to do that?

MR. N. RAJ.- The governance of it is something that I have more questions of than answers but certainly, given more time and more heavy discussion around these areas, I will be able to respond to that question.

HON. V. LAL.- Another concern is the data that we have. In this transition period, we are going to share data with Australian counterparts. In that case, what safeguards do we have in order to protect our children's data, about schools, examinations, et cetera? These are some of the pertinent questions which need to be asked.

MR. N. RAJ.- Yes, cybersecurity protection of data is important for us. While digital has been evolving and that space has been growing, the risk that it comes with is something that we need to be very careful of. I guess, those are some of the questions and points that we will be having in our future discussions with our counterparts. Unless you want to join in, Mr. Togavou, who is in charge for e-learning back in the Ministry?

MR. V. TOGAVOU.- Honourable Members, it is important to note that ITC is the overseer in doing all ICT initiatives for Government. That is where we put our hopes on, for all our platforms and for security purposes. For data privacy, we are trying to work it out, from the school level up to the Ministry level, having policies and instruments that will keep students' data safe.

HON. V. LAL.- In regard to technology companies, because Australia is talking about Australian standards, will this not restrict us from employing technology companies outside Australia in terms of buying software, hardware, technology gadgets and all that?

MR. V. TOGAVOU.- For all our procurement, even outside Australia, it has to come through ITC. Whether it is from Australia or outside Australia, it will come through ITC for tender approval.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Brain drain is a major issue in this country. I guess the biggest loss of any country's asset is when people migrate. Even if they go for education purposes, they are the drivers of our economy. Yes, it is their choice, by all means, if they wish to study abroad.

I will start with the TSLS model. We all were youth at one point. As youth of this country, when something is told for us not to do, sometimes we are so inspired, I guess, we just do it just to experience it. It is like a repulsive behaviour.

I want to talk about the penalty around TSLS. I have spoken to some students and they said that they do not want to study in Fiji because they do not want to pay the 50 percent penalty if they feel the need that they can pay off their debt any time sooner, or they do not want to study because they feel they are not going to find a job. Those are some of the domestic issues.

Are we considering taking some lessons from the Australian funding mechanism or system in order to improve the current model we have in Fiji? I do not think Australia would write off such debt or provide so much of student loans. This is all around student loans. Are we going to adopt a better mechanism to help our students take up education in Fiji rather than being repelled by it because of how some of the repayment systems are?

MR. N. RAJ.- Deputy Chairperson, I should mention you still look like a youth. Pardon my naiveness, I guess I need to know more about the TSLS model in terms of how they operate. However, my understanding is, this partnership is a grant, rather than a loan where you will be subject to penalty, et cetera. I stand to be corrected on that, when I will have further discussion.

The learnings from TSLS is a good example where I can lobby what you are trying to say. At this juncture, my understanding is, these are grants that will be allocated to those eligible students who would like to access Australian universities to study, as I had mentioned.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- We have seen this - someone qualified in Australia, coming back to Fiji, they are used to the lifestyle they had - the opportunities, obviously, that they would probably find abroad. How are we going to retain these skilled people, knowing that the environment, receiving the kind of pay with specialised overseas skills or education, has been the case for us for decades? How would you stop the brain drain of skilled people at the cost of grants?

MR. N. RAJ.- That is a very good and a most challenging question so far. The reality is, children who study abroad do not intend to come back, or even our own skilled and trained people tend to leave. How we retain them is the challenge all stakeholders are facing, including the Ministry of Education. How do we retain this talent?

As correctly pointed out, when children are exposed to certain institutions and environment in this modern day and era, perhaps, coming back to Fiji is not in their priority list. How do we encourage them to come back - give back to this country, repay the country for the opportunity they have been given, so come back and serve the country?

The mechanisms and conditions around our partnership when this happens, is something that I will take note of in our workplan. As I have mentioned in my speech, one of the risks is this brain drain that we face. We would like our children to go, get educated, make use of this opportunity, but return and serve our country.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- In this grant that has been allocated under the Treaty, I am just asking for any information you have; is it a boost to the Australian Awards that is currently in place, or is it something separate? Is there any work being done in terms of areas of specialisation?

Thinking out loud, I would say Fiji needs more gynaecologists because women's care and health before pregnancy and after is very critical. Then, again, if someone is going to study abroad to be a gynaecologist, they must be able to come back and we must provide those many clinics and those many employment opportunities which, obviously, is interlinked. Any information on how this grant will work when our locals go abroad?

MR. N. RAJ.- As I have mentioned, there are a lot of moving parts at this stage but, certainly, this is not added on to our existing arrangements. Those are separate, these is something

new. Those are additional, which we could strengthen from our current support and then increase our support in terms of the additional Vuvale Union that we have and how we can look at opportunities where the Ministry of Education can play a role.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Is it your Ministry that will decide on which key areas of studies this grant will be allocated to?

MR. N. RAJ.- We would like to be part of the discussion but not to take the sole responsibility of it because with partnership and discussion with our relevant stakeholders, we will get better decisions on what is best for the country.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- That is well noted.

HON. V. LAL.- I was reading the Ocean of Peace Alliance or the Veitacini Treaty, and as per Article 4, it talks about parties to develop individual and collective capacity. In this case, does this require the Ministry of Education to realign its technical and vocational education and training standards to prioritise defence-relevant vocational skills to support joint security readiness?

MR. N. RAJ.- To answer your question, there are a lot of learnings we can have from what is in our current scenario but moving forward, we can put forward suggestions as how we can strengthen this relationship. In terms of TVET, we have the Director TVET here, who may answer your question.

MR. D. RAMAN.- As for TVET, we are exploring more on the blue and green skills strategy. For blue skills, as you are all aware, we are emphasising more on maritime engineering, fisheries and marine conservation, and coastal infrastructure. Those are things that we are putting in our area of scope or study to help us enhance the knowledge of our students and to have that understanding.

On green skills, that is something that we are incorporating into our curriculum - renewable energy, solar installation which is now very common in Fiji, waste management and recycling, et cetera. Those are things that we are prioritising at the moment. We are trying to uplift our curriculum standards, measure up to the industry standards, as well as to the international standards and practices. That is where TVET, in that space of blue and green economy, we are exploring at the moment.

HON. V. LAL.- So your priority aligns with Australia's priority?

MR. N. RAJ.- I think another very unique area is shipbuilding – how we train our students in that space, perhaps, contextualise it. Our country has a lot of opportunities, but we have not explored it in depth. Maybe, this Treaty will be able to do so. Our children have a lot of potential.

HON. V. LAL.- My next question is more towards defence and security. We have our own programmes, that is what I am saying, but this Treaty is more aligned towards security and defence. Are we going to align our courses in that direction?

MR. N. RAJ.- Yes, ideally, we would like to align to the main core of this Treaty and have this curriculum, this teaching, this learning, these certificates, and these employment opportunities to be aligned as well for our future generation. In terms of priorities, I think different countries have their different priorities contextualised to their needs and their strengths. For Fiji, we have our own priorities, and what we need to do is, align to our Government priorities as well. As this Treaty is unfolded, we need to align to our Government needs and priorities accordingly.

HON. A.N. TUICOLO.- I understand that Fiji already faces high rates of worker and teacher attrition. The expanded overseas option can worsen domestic shortages in critical technical and educational roles. Are we prepared to engage regional students who have graduated from our higher education institutions to address this problem?

MR. N. RAJ.- Yes, the involvement of our institutions in terms of how we address the situation, and I think it was asked by Deputy Chairperson, is what the challenge the Ministry of Education is facing. How can we stop the brain drain?

In terms of qualification, upgrading and opportunities, this is where the Ministry of Education needs to play a critical role with our institutions – USP, FNU, University of Fiji and other institutions, in formulating a sustainable curriculum. It is benchmarked to our partners, our neighbouring countries, but it is sustainable so that we can be on par with future developments in sustainable education and other related areas.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you, PS, for your presentation today. Really, we look forward to the support given to Fiji to address the gaps within the Ministry, empower our children, our youth, uplift the curriculum and help you with the operational framework of the Ministry to report better, account better, and obviously take care of the welfare and wellbeing of our teachers and the students to always be in good behaviour. Thank you for all your insights. I appreciate your time and cooperation, and we look forward to your continued engagement should the Committee require any further information.

On that note, I declare this meeting closed.

The Committee meeting adjourned at 3.53 p.m.

Ministry of Environment and Climate Change

[VERBATIM REPORT]

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

UNION/TREATY

(1) FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION
(2) OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE (VEITACINI TREATY)

ENTITY: Ministry of Environment and Climate Change
VENUE: Big Committee Room 2 (East Wing)
DATE: Thursday, 17th September, 2026

VERBATIM REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE HELD AT THE COMMITTEE ROOM (EAST WING), PARLIAMENT PRECINCTS, GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, ON THURSDAY, 17TH SEPTEMBER, 2026, AT 10.15 A.M.

Present

Hon. R.R. Sharma - Deputy Chairperson

Hon. V. Lal - Member
Hon. A. Bia - Alternate Member
Hon. S. Kumar - Alternate Member

Apologies

Hon. L.S. Qereqeretabua - Chairperson

Hon. I. Tuiwailevu - Member

Hon. T.R. Matasawalevu - Member

Hon. P.K. Ravunawa - Member

Interviewee/Submittee: Ministry of Environment and Climate Change In Attendance:

(1) Dr. Sivendra Michael - Permanent Secretary
(2) Ms. Senimili Nakora - Director, Department of Environment
(3) Mr. Leo Vanualailai - Principal GIS Officer
(4) Ms. Rosalina Lagi - Principal Climate Change Officer, Carbon Markets

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DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Honourable Members, representatives from the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, members of the media and the public, dear viewers, ladies and gentlemen; a very good morning to you all. It is my pleasure to welcome everyone present in this room and those joining us via live broadcast.

At the outset, for information purposes, I wish to advise that pursuant to the Standing Orders of Parliament, specifically Standing Order 111, all Committee meetings are open to the public and media. Accordingly, this submission is open to the public and members of the media. However, should there be any sensitive information relating to this submission that cannot be disclosed publicly, such information may be provided to the Committee either in writing or in a closed session. This will only be permitted in limited circumstances, including matters relating to national security, third party confidential information, personnel or human resource matters, Committee deliberation and development of the Committee's recommendations and reports.

I wish to remind honourable Members and witnesses that all comments and questions should be directed through the Chair. For viewers following this meeting live on *Facebook*, questions may be submitted via the comment section. Please, note that only relevant questions will be considered by the Committee. Members of the Committee may interject during the submission or, alternatively, questions will be raised at the conclusion of the presentation.

I further remind all present in this room that this is a parliamentary proceeding. All information is protected under the Parliamentary Powers and Privileges Act and Standing Orders of Parliament. Slander or libel of any sort will not be condoned and all information presented to the Committee should be factual.

In terms of meeting protocols, movement within the meeting should be kept to a minimum. Usage of mobile phones is discouraged, and all mobile phones must be placed on silent for the duration of the meeting.

I will now introduce the Members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence.

(Introduction of Committee Members and Secretariat)

Today, the Committee will receive an in-person submission from the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change in relation to the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance Treaty, currently before the Committee. Now, I invite the representatives present today to introduce themselves one by one and proceed with their submission. You have 20 minutes for your opening statement and then we will have questions from the Committee Members.

Finally, note that microphones should be turned on before you speak and turned off immediately after speaking, to avoid any disruption to the live submission. The floor is yours, *vinaka*.

(Introduction of Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Officials)

DR. S. MICHAEL.- Good morning, Deputy Chairperson, Sir, and honourable Members of the Standing Committee, allow me to start with my opening intervention. First of all, allow me to thank you for allowing us the opportunity to provide our written feedback, as well as our feedback today.

The Ministry of Environment and Climate Change welcomes this opportunity to make this public submission on the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance, acknowledged as the Veitacini Treaty. We have reviewed both Treaties and the Written Analysis, and we are in full support of both Instruments and the position taken by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade as our lead agency.

Our submission follows eight matters in paragraph four of the Chairperson's letter. Deputy Chairperson, Sir, before we turn on to those matters, we must acknowledge that Fiji loses about 5 percent of GDP every year to climate-induced events, which is approximately FJD500 million, and floods and cyclones account for 80 percent of those events. That is the cost we carry now, out of the same fiscal space that funds our national development programme. It is why the preamble of the Vuvale Union records climate change as the single greatest threat to Pacific people and our communities.

Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members of the Committee, our Ministry has participated through the whole of government consultation, and has provided technical advice on environment, climate, biodiversity, oceans, and resilience dimensions on both Instruments. We should explain how these Instruments are built because it shapes the work ahead of us.

The Vuvale Union is a framework Treaty. It sets the purpose and the commitments and the governance, while sectoral programmes sit under the Vuvale Union Workplan which, under Article 7(4), states that the Vuvale Bukmak develops and oversees. Our delivery work, therefore, begins with that Workplan and the annual implementation planning that follows.

In implementation, we expect to lead or co-lead on the climate and the peace pillar, working closely with Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Strategic Planning,

Ministry of Public Works, Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry, as well as Ministry of Defence and the

National Disaster Management Office. Our role is to translate the climate and environmental commitments into practical action, aligned with our national laws and international obligations.

Deputy Chairperson, Sir, the Vuvale Union is a more directly relevant Instrument for our portfolio. It, firstly, reaffirms the *Boe Declaration*, which expended the definition of security to include climate change, environmental degradation, economic security and human security.

Article 2(2)(c) makes advancing climate security as one of the four commitments on which the Union rests. Article 4, which is on climate and peace, is another anchor provision for this Ministry. Under that Article, the parties commit to –

(1) Mutually advocate for ambitious and meaningful action on climate change in support of Pacific goals endorsed by the Pacific Islands Forum.
(2) Transform their economies to net zero emissions.
(3) Support adaptation and mobility with dignity for Pacific peoples, recognising the threat posed by climate change.
(4) Act on illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and protect critical infrastructure whereby Article 4(6) defines this critical infrastructure to be ports, telecommunications, digital, aviation and energy infrastructure.

We draw attention to two provisions in particular - Article 4(7) provides that neither party shall act in a manner that would undermine its ability to meet its obligations under the Articles, and Article 4(8) commits the parties to consult on any matter arising under it at the written request of either party. Together, this give Fiji a standing and binding right to require Australia to sit down with us on any climate matter within Article 4 in writing, and at the time of our choosing. Fiji has not held that right before, and it is the most useful provision in the Treaty of our portfolio.

Article 3 places economic, social, environmental and human dignity at the centre of a lasting peace and resilience concept. Article 5 also commits both parties to bolster the Pacific Islands Forum as the apex of the regional architecture and provides for an ocean of peace centre in Suva, established in consultation with the Forum Members.

Most importantly, in terms of governance, Articles 6 and 7 establish the Vuvale Forum at the Ministerial level, but the Vuvale Bukmak at the Senior Officials level.

The Veitacini Treaty is the defence and mutual security Instrument, and it touches our mandate at three levels, as follows:

(1) Article 7 provides for visiting forces arrangements which carry environmental, biosecurity, waste and marine protection consequences that we will address in those arrangements.

(2) Article 10(2) preserves each party's obligations under the agreements in force, including the Paris Agreement and the multilateral environmental agreements we have identified in this process.

(3) Expanded security definition that both Instruments carry from the *Boe Declaration*, as mentioned earlier.

Deputy Chairperson, Sir, and honourable Members of the Committee, Fiji and Australia already cooperate closely on climate and environmental matters, and that cooperation is important. Australia has, at least, eight bilateral regional and climate and resilient investments running currently in Fiji. The flagship is the Fiji Climate Adaptation Programme, valued at FJD35 million, which is expected to end in 2029, and this is directed at flood risk, and beginning in the Nadi River catchment.

Alongside it sits the Fiji Social Infrastructure Programme, which is now valued at FJD80 million. I understand that Australia has increased its investment from FJD56 million to FJD80 million for climate resilient schools and health facilities, off grid renewable energy for remote communities, disaster resilience, coastal infrastructure and also the preparation of the Nadi Flood Alleviation Project alongside Japan.

Under these Treaties, that cooperation is actually elevated and broadened. What changes is the footing. We are actually moving by project cooperation to a very structured treaty-backed partnership with an agreed governance and a 10-year horizon.

Deputy Chairperson, Sir, Australia's Cabinet has actually agreed to a 10-year Work plan to give effect to both Treaties. As announced by the Australian Prime Minister in July, this commitment exceeds FJD1.5 billion, which is approximately FJD1.05 billion in grants and FJD550 million in loans. It is additional and new to the existing bilateral work that is already committed by Australia and represents approximately a doubling of Australia's partnership with Fiji.

The four components that directly bear on our portfolio - national building infrastructure, digital transition, circular mobility and skills, and the Ocean of Peace Centre, we can assure the Committee that this is not a plan waiting to start. The Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific Mission (AIFFP) met with us this week, again, on the Nadi Flood Alleviation Project. We will report progress through the Vuvale Bukmak and ensure alignment with Fiji's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), National Adaptation and National Development Plan.

Deputy Chairperson, Sir, the Treaties also offer real benefits within our sector. Allow me to talk about this very important issue - predictable multi-year financing that lets us plan adaptation across budget cycles rather than project by project. Every year, the Ministry is faced with this issue where we have to ask which Ministries are doing which projects, then provide an appraisal to the Ministry of Finance. Then the Ministry of Finance puts that project into that SEG. We then allocate the funding accordingly. This gives us a 10-year horizon to know when the projects will start, what year, so that they can be already included in the subsequent financial year of our financial books.

It is really hard that when we are committing a short-term project, for example, a two-year project, at the end of the first year, we have to return all the money. Then we have one more month to bring back that money to restart the project. With this kind of long-term thinking, it will be something that we can already plan our projects on how we want to implement them - a scale that is beyond our own reach of our own fiscal space. For example, coastal protection, climate resilient water systems, sports and renewable energy projects will not take one year - it will take multiple years. I think we need to think beyond what our fiscal space can provide, so that surety is also there.

Stronger disaster preparedness and early warning and a binding right of consultation under Article 48. I think the most important one is to establish the regional hub for climate security cooperation through the Ocean of Peace Centre. The Workplan also allocates $15.5 million to culture and faith-based links, which matter for social cohesion on which community resilience projects depend.

Deputy Chairperson, Sir, based on our assessment, Fiji does not require a new primary legislation to give effect to the commitments relevant to our mandate because they have been already included in our existing laws. The Treaty aligns with the broad objectives of the Climate Change Act 2021 and the Environment Management (Amendment) Act 2025, and they are supported by other existing laws, such as the National Disaster Risk Management Act 2024, the Fisheries (Amendment) Act 2025 and the Financial Management Act 2004.

I think what is required now, Deputy Chairperson, Sir, and honourable Members is administrative in nature, and we wish to highlight the following:

(1) Cabinet should confirm lead agencies and coordination arrangements for each Ministry's component of work under the Workplan, and the senior focal points from respective Ministries designated to participate in the Vuvale Bukmak.

(2) The Ministry of Environment and Climate Change must be represented whenever environment, climate, and ocean resilience matters are discussed. Implementation activities must also comply with existing environmental impact assessment and permit requirements, biosecurity controls, waste management

pollution, and hazardous substance regulations. It does not mean that we are in agreement that these waivers and provisions apply - there is no such provision in any of our laws that allow for such to prevail, so we must actually apply our existing laws and policies.

(3) In relation to the specific provision on Visiting Forces arrangements under Article 7 of the Vaitacini Treaty, these arrangements must also include a clear environmental protocol covering impact assessment, biosecurity, waste marine protection, cultural protocols and also liability.

Finally, which I have my GIS focal point here who will speak to it later, is that in relation to data and information sharing, we must have robust protocols which will be required to enable the sharing of data, maritime and infrastructure data to help us with our decision making.

Deputy Chairperson, Sir, implementation costs should be reflected in Fiji's annual budget process and Australia's multi-year support and will provide counterpart resourcing in the normal way. We can be very candid about our own position. Our Ministry is very committed against its current mandate, which spans climate finance access, international negotiation, national reporting and environmental regulations.

Delivering our respective responsibilities against a 10-year Workplan will require additional resources and technical capacity. Our view, which must be on record, is that additional capacity is best funded through our national budget so that the capability is established within the Ministry. This can be complemented by technical assistance that the Partnership will provide. So, our own staff must come from our own budgets and any technical capacity that we require should come from the technical assistance that we get so that the capability that we need is built within and is sustained beyond the 10 years.

The strength of these Treaties is that it gives us also a bilateral channel that is more predictable than those that are available in a multilateral space. I say this because we all know that global climate finance is very unpredictable in this complex world, and its access is also very complex, so we should be able to build on the capacity to leverage on bilateral partnerships.

Our priority is to also ensure that the relevant components of the financial support package is translated into tangible outcomes. I believe every viewer right now in public is asking us, what are the actual lives that you will change in the community? How will this funding reach us? So, we want to see climate resilient water systems, resilient port infrastructure, renewable energy options for remote communities, coastal protection works, meteorological monitoring, and even early warning systems and facilities that can really make a change in the lives of our communities.

Deputy Chairperson, Sir, the community has also asked us to highlight any issues we believe that we should take into account. We seek to present four matters that our Ministry will actively manage and focus through the implementation of these arrangements, to ensure that they deliver what they promise. They are as follows:

(1) The scope of the security concept. Both Instruments adopt the *Boe Declaration* Expanded Definition, and the Vuvale Union names climate change as the single greatest threat to our region. Our task in the Bukmak is to keep that scope alive in the context of planning, so that climate disaster management and ocean health are given the weight and focus that is required alongside the more traditional security-related focus issues. We would welcome the effort to ensure associated implementation plans are tabled in Parliament, so that honourable Members can confirm this balance and emphasise that it is maintained.

(2) On sovereignty and community consent, all cooperation must be oriented around the respect for Fiji's sovereignty and our customary rights over our land and our ocean. Communities, Provincial Councils, iTaukei institutions, women, youth and persons with disabilities must be consulted before any work that affects their land, their reef and their ocean commences. Compliance is important with environmental impact assessment processes under the Environment Management (Amendment) Act 2025, which applies the same to the Australian-funded work, as it does with any other investment.

(3) We must focus on coherence. On this, we ensure that the implementation of these Treaties supports and complements existing regional and national priorities, initiatives and governance arrangements. We must avoid duplication and seek to leverage co-benefits, especially when dealing with complex linkages between different thematic focus areas of these arrangements.

We will work through the relevant regional processes to establish the Ocean of Peace Centre, as Article 5(2) requires. This should complement the work of the Pacific Islands Forum, SPREP, and the Pacific Resilience Facility. Fiji, hosting the Centre, is a significant gain for our country, and we intend to ensure that its governance, objectives and arrangements are clear to value-add for this region.

(4) On disputes and the importance of the Pacific Way, Article 8 of the Vuvale Union and Article 11 of the Veitacini Treaty provides for disputes to be settled between parties through the Vuvale Union and the Vuvale Bukmak. That is a deliberate choice, consistent with the Pacific Way recorded in both preambles, which settles issues through *talanoa* and consensus, while respecting sovereignty and rejecting cohesion.

We will use these mechanisms we have been given, particularly, Article 4(8), the right for written consultation, and keep a clear record of their issue. We must ensure that these treaties provide the platform for resolving our differences and advancing our actions required to address difficult challenges that our region faces.

Deputy Chairperson, Sir, and Members of the Committee, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change supports both Treaties without qualification. We would remind the community how we arrived here. Fiji proposed the elevation of the Vuvale Partnership to a treaty level, and climate change remains to be a multidimensional threat, and both these Treaties elevate that recognition. They orientate our priorities of our engagement with the largest bilateral partner for the next decade, and it provides us with a renewed and a clear formal basis for cooperation and consultation.

Thank you, Deputy Chairperson, Sir, and Members of the Committee. We are happy to take any questions.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you, PS. I now open the floor for any questions from Members.

HON. A. BIA.- Thank you, PS, for the thorough presentation. Just in regard to climate finance, I know that currently and also from the previous government, climate finance is very complex, like you have mentioned. However, in regard to the Union that has been developed, how can we ensure this? We do not want an agreement or a treaty that just looks good on paper, but when it is time for practical solutions on the ground, it is complex in terms of getting the funding. It is very hard, like you have to move, go around and get funding. How can we ensure that with this Union of Australia and Fiji, I know that there is a level of thorough process that needs to be followed but at the same time, when you talk about climate change in terms of actions, projects, there needs to be some simplicity, especially for Pacific Island Countries that do face these issues daily.

DR. S. MICHAEL.- Deputy Chairperson, through you, honourable Member, you are absolutely correct. When we talk about global climate finance, we talk about the multilateral process and usually under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), there are multiple entry points to access climate finance. For example, the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) allocates a portion of the funding that is received from developed countries to respective countries based on a criterion. For example, Fiji gets $12.8 million in the last replenishment, and that is the GEF8 replenishment. We are now on GF9. Under the $12.8 million, only $2 million was allocated to climate change because the focus is more on biodiversity.

Then we have Green Climate Fund (GCF) that also gives funding through a very complex process. Obviously, you have to do all the due diligence and prepare the paperwork in order for us to qualify. The last time Fiji qualified for a national project was 2017, and our last full national project was endorsed in the last Board meeting, which was with FAO.

Our next project is going in the next Board meeting, which is with WWF. So, this is our second and our third national projects that are actually being prioritised since our ADB funded Water Infrastructure got funded in 2017. So, since 2017, we only have had after that many projects, but regional, where multiple countries come together and prioritise that, so this is the second that has been approved. Now, the third that we are looking at is around 40-something million.

Then we have the Adaptation Fund, which is similar to GEF, but it has an envelope. We get a $20 million envelope, we appraise the projects, those envelopes are allocated through a criterion, and they come in through that process.

Now, just after the Dubai COP28, we have the fund for the Loss and Damage. The Fund for the Loss and Damage has not dispersed any funds to date - it is still at the proposal stage, so we are preparing the proposals to be submitted for consideration in the 10th Board meeting, which is in December this year.

If you do a GEF project and a GCF project, it takes time. We do concept note, we get approved, the concept note, then there is a project preparation facility where we get some funds to prepare the full proposal. And that goes through a process where the Council will approve and then come back.

For GCF, sometimes I am sitting there with a 1,000-page document or 1,500-page document, reading each and every page because it goes through three reviews. With this process, and through the multilateral process, it is good that those are our entry points, but there are some things that this multilateral process cannot fund. For example, GEF cannot fund hard infrastructure - they cannot fund a port facility. So, we must say, "Alright, what can GEF fund?" If we are wanting to do a port facility, then obviously we can get the risk informing component from GEF. Then when we are ready, we are just telling Australia that this is what it would cost to do the port, how much of the Government budget should be allocated to that support and how much of your funding should come, and for that.

I think, to take a step back, we need to first agree on the areas which have already been agreed with Australia. So, there is a couple of areas that I have spoken about and in the breakdown of that process, you have, for example, Ocean of Peace Centre - $39 million, digital transition, transnational crime, HIV, culture, et cetera. We need to break down what each of these would be.

As I have said, for any funding that comes for donor, we need to also set guidelines on how we access that. It should not go through an entire lengthy process because it is a bilateral arrangement, so the templates, the guidance, the 'no objection' letter process that we need between the two in terms of procurement rules, we need to sit on the same table and agree where we apply whose procurement process and because this is a bilateral funding made to Fiji, Fiji should take the pen and say, "This is how we are going to do things. This is where you come in and provide support." I think if we can be very absolutely clear, like we did in the negotiations, in the way forward in terms of implementation, that should set the precedence of how we will access the funds.

HON. A. BIA.- Thank you, PS. It goes back to what you also mentioned, that Government must select lead agencies so that there is clarity in this.

HON. V. LAL.- Thank you, PS, for your presentation. Deputy Chairperson, through you, we all have our own climate timelines. Fiji has, in terms of emissions and net zero. Australia has its own. So, my question is, how are we going to match? When Australia's timelines diverge from the more aggressive climate timelines advocated by Fiji, how are we going to match because we all have our own standards?

DR. S. MICHAEL.- Deputy Chairperson, through you, I think that is a very candid question because it is really asking us how we can advance our priorities, our goals and our commitments, at the same time, holding Australia to that. I think the Ministry should not be in a position to tell this Committee that the Treaty solves it because it does not.

Article 4(2)(c) is an obligation to advocate mutually for ambitious actions in support of the Forum-endorsed goals, and I think it does not constrain, like Australia's export of fossil fuels or its production. I think Fiji should not present to its people that it does. What we think the Treaty gives us is that Article 4(7), by which neither party may act so as to undermine its ability to meet its obligations under Article 4, and Article 4(8), which is a binding right to require consultation in writing on any Article 4 matter at the time of Fiji's choosing, I would say, Sir, that Fiji positions itself in the UNFCCC, we were the first to ratify the Paris Agreement at COP31 and we also made a very strong submission to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) advisory opinion, so all of those should remain unaffected by these Instruments and we should continue to press for them.

To bring you back to the question you asked, I think we should invoke Article 4(8) to ask Australia how it is meeting its obligations at the same time as we are ambitious because that consultation in writing is allowed through this Treaty and we can actually ask them, "We are committed to meeting our Paris Agreement, we would also ask you to match that ambition." So, I think that conversation can happen, and on the side, we should continue progressing

how we have been negotiating in UNFCCC, in the Paris Agreement, et cetera, because that is a very important process that is allowed, based on sovereign rights.

HON. V. LAL.- PS, what regulatory burdens will this transition place on which is domestic manufacturing and energy sectors?

DR. S. MICHAEL.- Deputy Chairperson, through you, at some point, this conversation has to come across all the sectors. I think the transition that we are looking at should be just, and that is the transition that we need to have discussion Australia. As I have said, if we are really going to ask them, we can ask them to sit down with us in writing and have a consultation on what does that look like for them, and what it should look like for us, and that should be driven from the bottom up because we are talking about industries that need to reform, whether there are alternatives available to them, and what would that cost. That is the process itself.

We need to do a feasibility to understand what the transition would mean. If we move from fossil fuel industry and dependence to renewable energy, is our grid systems ready to take the load, et cetera? I think those are genuine questions that Australia can really sit with us and answer, and see where their intervention can align, but also not forgetting that this is not only a one bilateral partnership that is going to solve the issue - we also have to bring other bilateral partners along with us to say, "This is where Fiji's trajectory is towards. We want to be 100 percent grid renewable by 2036", so renewable energy by 2036.

Before we were 2030, but we did not have the baseline. When we did our NDC 3.0, we found out that we will not achieve the 2030 target because the baseline showed that there are so many infrastructural gaps that need to be addressed. We then revised our NDC 3.0 target to 2036, so to get there, what are all the things that are needed and where Australia sees value in supporting, and where we can ask them to support, should be discussed.

HON. V. LAL.- Thank you, PS. In your presentation, you said that you were involved in the initial consultation with Australian counterparts. Were these issues discussed then?

DR. S. MICHAEL.- As I have said, we have agreed on the broader areas and the scope under each of it, but we have not gone into the specifics of where each of the funding should flow. That, I think, will come in the Bukmak process where Senior Officials in implementing Ministries need to speak to each other on who is going to lead on what, how is it going to be led, who is going to be the core lead, because some of these things, such as nature-based seawalls or climate resilient water systems require both, the Ministry of Public Works and the Ministry of Waterways, so they need to work together to identify who does what. When the negotiations was happening, it was around the sectors of priority, alignment to the NDC and

alignment to the National Development Goals. It does not go into how and when and those processes, and those are the things that the Workplan should outline.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- PS, this was an agreement before and now it is formalized into a treaty. What are the gaps that still remain for Fiji rather than keeping the scope very wide? It can be very ambiguous, there will be various sectors or Ministries wanting their share, but for your Ministry, how do you feel that your input was best represented in this Treaty?

DR. S. MICHAEL.- I mean, our NDC is costed at around $10 billion, so we are currently going through a re-costing process. We are doing a costed implementation plan for our NDCs. The funding that we are talking about is going to be a small portion of it and it is diversified across different sectors.

I think what is really important is, once we go through that costed implementation plan to see which ones, because in our NDC, one thing that is very clear is we have conditional and unconditional and with conditional, we can only implement this if we get funding, and unconditional is what we can do which we are already doing with existing partnerships and national processes.

There are very few NDC targets that are unconditional. Mostly, it is conditional or dependent on something - on governing structures, on enabling environment, et cetera. So, I would say, Sir, that it would be worthwhile for us to see the sectoral analysis that come out of this costed implementation plan, to see how much of it can be covered through this partnership. I have given you this ballpark figure in terms of the four areas.

Currently, we have digital transition at $146 million, the national building infrastructure at $228 million in grants and $550 million in loans, the secular mobility which honourable Lal asked is around $87 million and the Ocean of Peace Centre at $39 million. So, for us, if we add up all of these, it is almost half of the total funding that is available to climate change priorities.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- PS, talking about implementation, there are questions raised on feasibility and accountability. I will talk about what is happening currently in Fiji. We have the litter law that has gone from a little fine of $40 to $200. We have the trash boom initiative collecting waste from these lakes, rivers, but they are not being cleaned up. These are very small-scale initiatives. It is an attempt, but the implementation still remains a challenge. With this Treaty enforced and the funding received, will we exactly get to see that, "Alright, these millions of dollars was allocated for this particular project?" Then we are able to tell the people, "Alright, the funding, the aid has come exactly for this particular initiative, under the Ministry

of Environment and Climate Change and, probably, with Ministry of Public Works as well, and this is how effective it is."

DR. S. MICHAEL.- Deputy Chairperson, Sir, I think that should be the level of accountability that should be accorded through this process because any funding that is coming to the Government should come through the Ministry of Finance through the Consolidated Fund Account (CFA) process. So, it is deposited into the CFA. For us to draw from that, we should have a workplan and we should have the deliverables that come out of that. So, the Ministry, therefore, is supposed to respond on how much of the funding is actually spent on each of the line items and that accountability is owed to the line Ministry, which is Ministry of Finance, and it is audited as well.

I think what really matters to me is, who are the direct beneficiaries of these projects? Because we go down to communities, we implement these projects, we should really know the number of people who actually benefit from that and the indirect benefits as well. For example, the Nadi Flood Alleviation Project. Those must be properly factored into the design or the makeup of the project - how the funds will go, which interventions will be funded by Australia, which interventions will be funded by the Government of Japan because it is a co-partnership, which ones should be funded by the Fiji Government. In that way, we can then say, "Alright, yes, the direct benefits can be thousands of people, but without component A and B, we would not have a component C.

I think we owe it to our people and the communities that we serve on the transparency of how those funds have flowed and what it has delivered, whether it is through a disclosure in the Parliament sitting, through a written submission, whether it is through an audited account, we need to provide that accordingly, and I think it is in the financial framework of the Government of Fiji.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- How does your Ministry hold these other Ministries accountable. Let us just say there is a sewer leak. How do you charge them? How would you find them? Is there any mechanism to do so, or is it just for the public?

DR. S. MICHAEL.- With the sewer leak, we have an internal compliance, so we issue a noncompliance to the agency. We work with the wastewater sewage committee. We have an internal working committee that addresses this. So, there are two factors with sewer, all sewer lines in Fiji are either connected through WAF, or they are personal, like a personal household. When it is through WAF, we work with them to try and address that. Obviously, there are some things that are beyond our control.

To use another example, how do you manage those companies that do not have a permit? We are currently amending our law because, previously, we only can issue a non-compliance notice, we give them 21 days to comply with the notice to come and put in your waste disposal permit or your waste transport permit. Then from thereafter, once they apply, then we have conditions on how they must implement.

We want to change that. If you do not have a permit and you are doing something, then that is a fine, and that is when we did the amendment to our Environment Management Act last year, that was passed. You would have seen that there is a $50,000 fine for unauthorized development. It is a fixed penalty. I think we have invoked provisions in our principal Act, but we have to change our regulations in order to enforce them. So, that is the process the Ministry is taking now and it is applicable to all, whether it is a Ministry, whether it is a statutory authority, or whether it is private sector.

Currently, the enforcement component, as you rightfully said, Sir, is something that is lacking because we need manpower and for the litter in particular, we have trained around 420 people. By law, they have to be public officials and under public officials, there are also police, et cetera.

We are asked questions such as, what about expanding the scope to other people?

Unfortunately, accountability is another factor because it involves fine and then the provision of a penalty. So, the laws do not allow us to expand beyond the public officials. So, we have trained 408, including LTA Officers, Police Officers, civil servants. It is the matter of going out and enforcing it very aggressively.

You would have seen during Hibiscus, all the teams were out doing inspections, holding the booth owners to account, and I think it starts from that, just to be actively out there, including myself as an LPO, we have to also do the same. It applies to all of us.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- PS, you spoke about Hibiscus. It is funny because when it was over, the smell was so bad and the ground looked horrible. Yesterday, I took a photo of, probably, a bone from a piece of lamb chops, right beside my vehicle, so I guess the cleaning has not even been done yet.

Speaking of fossil fuels, Australia's annual report had said that their fossil fuel industry has contributed $165 billion to the economy in the last year. Now, Australia is one of the first, second, third, I guess, in number when it comes to fossil fuels and carbon emission.

Fiji is getting $1.5 billion. If you break it down in 10 years, $150 million is nothing for us. Is this a way to silence the Pacific voices that are continuously, or for decades, fighting against the effects of climate change?

DR. S. MICHAEL.- As I have said before, Deputy Chairperson, there's two provisions that we can invoke - one is to provide in written consultation and ask and have this, but we must not forget that there are sovereign processes outside, which is the ICJ, the ITLOS that we have advanced very well, and we must continue to progress them in the multilateral space.

What I would definitely say is that there is not an indefinite duration for the Vuvale Partnership because Article 10(4) actually permits any party to terminate within 24 months of written notice, and Article 10(5) allows a termination notice to be withdrawn if the dispute is resolved. I think if we go through the details of the Clauses in the Treaty, we are able to really invoke what the partnership should look like, and they should be based on national priorities. If our national priorities change, we must communicate this clearly through a written notice, have another consultation, and reprioritize what those funding looks like.

I will not be in a position to talk about what Australia's sovereign decisions are because this does not fall under the principles of this agreement. What it does allow us to do is hold them to the ambitious outcomes that we want to achieve through this Treaty, through consultation.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Australia has signed up to the AUKUS. It is very controversial for Australia right now and the whole plan is to actually get nuclear submarines by 2013 from the US and Australia to develop their nuclear submarines by 2040. With Australia bringing in their defense and technology to our ports, our EEZ and waters, now Fiji talks about Ocean of Peace which is just a document, or you would say, a building.

However, a building cannot determine an ocean of peace when there is a lot of presence from the Chinese. In fact, after this Treaty was signed, you had China firing their ballistic missiles in the Pacific Ocean. How would you, sort of, elaborate on the Ocean of Peace and Fiji's actual position, rather than saying 'yes' to our bigger bilateral partners who have signed up to bigger treaties or security partnerships, like AUKUS? This is about the defence and safety and security of the Pacific Ocean.

DR. S. MICHAEL.- Thank you, Chairperson. Sir, I believe that that provision and that work falls squarely under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade and the Ministry of Defence. Our Ministry will not speak on that mandate because it is beyond our mandate.

However, what I would say is that the Ministry notes that in Article 4(3), this sits beside Article 4(2)(b) on how parties are engaged in critical infrastructure and technology, and the critical

infrastructure under Article 4(6) looks at projects that require environmental impact assessment under the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations. From our side, I believe this is a matter that squarely sits under the Ministry of Defence, and it is beyond our mandate to speak on that.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Well, I would suggest your Ministry to look into the radioactive toxic waste that is released from the launching of these nuclear missiles, which these activities are already happening, despite Fiji ratifying the BBNJ Treaty.

A very quick one; what we have seen is the poor consultation within Fiji when it comes to this Treaty and this Treaty harps about the Pacific way, their dialogue, et cetera. So, public works, critical infrastructure, that will help your Ministry to ensure that, "Alright, we are climate resilient, we are combating climate", but they have not been consulted, and it is the PS who was here admitting that. So, PS, what is the Pacific way of dialogue? Is this just hypocrisy that we want to have dialogue with our bilateral partners, but we are failing to have dialogue with critical stakeholders within, and the general public?

DR. S. MICHAEL.- Deputy Chairperson, Sir, I can only speak on the process that I was part of. We were well consulted. I was on the table during those consultations, alongside the whole other lots of Permanent Secretaries. I believe that time is of essence as well to most of us Permanent Secretaries and if those consultations are taking place when we are not available, that is something to also factor in for us to consider pocket consultations.

However, as I have said, currently, only the broad thematic areas have been agreed, without the necessities of what the Workplan should entail. We still have the Workplan, through the Bukmak which is Senior Officials seated before you that will be deciding on what those should be and what activities should fall under. So, all ministries that require to co-design the interventions that are necessary, aligned to our NDCs, aligned to our National Development Plan, we still have a process of the Workplan where we should be involved.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- How long will this Workplan take in totality?

DR. S. MICHAEL.- I think for the Workplan, some of the components, like the Nadi Flood Alleviation Project, we have already started through the environmental assessments. We have done the site visit in Queensland. Our EIA Team has just come back now with Leo, who attended as well, to try and go through the EIA processes. So, the components that rest with each of the Ministries, for example, renewable energy, that should be done in a very targeted way.

I would say that you do not want to get every ministry to come in and talk about a mandate that belongs to one Ministry. So, Australia would have to have that discussion with them, the Senior Officials, and then come up with the Workplan.

To answer your question, it really depends on the scope of the provision of support that is going to be provided. If the scope is very narrowed and just on particular elements, the consultation for the Workplan should be shorter, but the Workplan should also be an iterative document. You cannot fixate an outcome and not envision that something in the near future will change, that can happen, so those are the provisions that the Vuvale Workplan has already made clear that this can change.

One of the good examples is the pre-COP 31. When we started these consultations, pre-COP 31 was still discussed at the Troika level. When it was agreed that Fiji will host the pre-COP, that Vuvale Partnership allowed us to ensure that we receive the necessary funding support in order to host this pre-COP in Fiji.

HON. A. BIA.- Thank you, PS. Article 8(2) of the Australia-Fiji Vuvale Union talks about dispute resolutions. It states that when there is a dispute, it cannot be taken to a tribunal, court, or any third party. Just from climate financing perspective, do you think it is fair if the two are at loggerheads, maybe in terms of allocation of projects?

HON. A. BIA.- Do you think it is fair from climate financing perspective that there needs to be a third party?

DR. S. MICHAEL.- I think this is why I keep falling back to Article 4(8) where we can provide in writing and we can demand where we choose to sit to have these discussions and I think in the spirit of cooperation and respect that we have for each other as partners of the Pacific and Fiji, as a country where many other Pacific Island Countries look up to us as the big brother, we should always embrace that spirit, the same spirit of consensus that we use in multilateral space, to sit with Australia and discuss this.

I think the matters regarding tribunal are factors that can be discussed in the near future, on whether a mediator or someone can come into this process, but those are things that I think that is beyond the ratification of the Treaty. It should be a governance procedure that can be agreed in the later part of this agreement.

HON. S. KUMAR.- Deputy Chairperson, through you, on Article 8(2) - exclusion of international environmental tribunals, strictly mandates that any dispute arising under this Treaty shall not be referred to any national or international tribunal or court or any third party for resolution. My question is, if a dispute arises regarding transboundary pollution, failed climate adaptation

funding, or ecological damage from joint operations, how will the Ministry seek neutral legal recourse when international environmental courts are barred?

DR. S. MICHAEL.- Deputy Chairperson, Sir, through you, as I have said, no one should be exempted from the laws of our land. Our constitutional provisions, our environmental laws and our climate change laws are sufficiently adequate to hold others to account. We have done it before, and we should not shy away from doing the same, in terms of the application of these laws and in terms of the support that is being provided. For example, if an environmental project is to go ahead and there is no permit in place, they have progressed without the necessary, obviously, that is not something that our partners always respect, but if it proceeds, then the Director of Environment has the powers to invoke the prohibition notice, issue the fixed penalty and, you know, redress.

We also have amended our laws to the level of ensuring that our courts still can call the matter because it is a development issue. I think where the provisions do lie, it is when it says, "It is excluded referral to any national and international court on Article 3 permits either party to suspend compliance pending resolution of a dispute", there are mechanisms within the national law that can apply in terms of how we do that. However, I want you to go back to the Article that I have consistently mentioned, which is Article 4(8), which is the written consultation. Every use of it needs to be really looked at. We can table the workplan annually in Parliament so that this record is public, and the committee can see it.

I think it is really important that if those things are coming up, proper planning must be done. Those must be disclosed. We are within this agreement, doing information sharing. We should have an information on what is coming to our shores and what is not coming, and the Ministry of Defense is very, very candid and astute in knowing how to manage these relationships, and I think we should really leverage on that.

HON. V. LAL.- A last question from me. Recognising the threats posed by climate change, and I can see on Article 4(4)(b), "requires supporting adaptation and mobility with dignity for Pacific peoples". In this case, PS, how will we manage if climate displaced population migrate to, or if there is internal migration? How are you going to manage this?

MS. R. LAGI.- Deputy Chairperson, through you, for Article 4(4)(b), it commits both parties to support adaptation and mobility with dignity for Pacific peoples, recognising the existential threat posed by climate change. So, Fiji's approach is that adaptation in place comes first, then relocation is a last resort, and where relocation is unavoidable, it is community-led and rights-based. We also have our different institutional mandates and processes that provide the gates to safeguard our communities. So, the FJD87 million secular mobility and skills component concerns labour mobility, visitor and business visa settings, and skills training. So, the two should not be read together.

DR. S. MICHAEL.- Just to complement that response, that is a very important point that you have asked because respecting people's dignity would be their right to choose to relocate. We cannot force relocation, and as we have said, Fiji's relocation is the last resort and if the question is from overseas to Fiji, then there should be particular principles and values. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Office of the Prime Minister, the International Organization for Migration and others, are already talking about relocation beyond boundaries. As Permanent Secretaries, these are our everyday conversations.

Obviously, there are many things that we need to address before any such things happen. For example, legal Instruments, how would they be legally treated? Ownership of land, so all of those things. Dignity, yes, and dignity is placed in the middle of this because it is one of the fundamental values where a person has to be consented and as my colleague, Ms. Lagi, has said, it is a rightsbased movement. If there is no consent to move, then obviously those principles are not in line with the way that Fiji looks at relocation, and that would be discussed openly within this process. I think, at this stage, that process would require a fundamental governance and relook at our international laws and commitments as well, because climate refugee is not an international concept that we are looking at right now.

HON. V. LAL.- There is decision that they are going to migrate. Will it be done in consultation with Fiji, or it is just decided that, "Alright, these people will be going to Fiji", or things like that?

DR. S. MICHAEL.- I do not see that in the provisions of this Treaty *per se* - nothing on those. As we have said, probably, there is a misreading on what is the provision of support within the Treaty and what we are looking at.

The issue that we are raising is something that our national laws are not ready yet. We do not have the necessary governance structure to accommodate such a setting, so where it has happened in the past, it is through bilateral arrangements. Consultations have happened, and I am talking about like, ages ago when our Tuvalu population are in Kioa Island and our Kiribati population are in Rabi. During those times, these were internal mechanisms and processes, and we are talking about the 1900s, early 1900s. I think it was part of a process where they had moved as well.

Right now, as much as I want to talk about the framework and the principles of climate mobility, internationally, this is also a discussion in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) process. It is also a discussion right now with the sea level rise questions that we are asking and I think, right now, the migration is mostly vice versa, where Australia, through the Falepili Treaty, has offered the Government of Tuvalu an opportunity to migrate to Australia in acknowledging the impacts of climate change. The return movement is something that we

have not had a discussion about and it is not covered in the provisions of this Treaty. I think a separate discussion will need to take place if those provisions are being thought of right now.

HON. V. LAL.- Meaning, that if we reach that stage, then there needs to be legal, financial and environmental protocols that has to be developed to cater for that?

DR. S. MICHAEL.- And cultural as well, as there needs to be legal instruments in order for that to happen.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- PS, my last question is about the decades of slogans that we would like to raise about climate vulnerability, et cetera, for Fiji. I feel like it is being overused and a lot of dependency is going into trying to show how vulnerable we are to climate change and to access finance because we are, probably, failing within our country to stand on our own feet. Our national budget is not able to provide enough support so that we are able to take care of our own affairs, and this creates dependency on other nations.

Looking at geopolitics, how it shapes alliance and trades, there is always a power nation ready to fund or help. So, the question is, what is the pressure on dependency - is it shifting more towards trying to access climate finance for Fiji? What is being done to say, "Hey, look, we cannot be taking funds from every place possible. It's never a free lunch." There is always an ask, and the question is when and what? What needs to be done back home so that we are actually somewhat on our feet when it comes to tackling some of the climate challenges that we face, and to share the pressure or the dependency right now on accessing global finance for climate change?

DR. S. MICHAEL.- Thank you, Deputy Chairperson. I would say two things, before I come to that point. Firstly, as parties to the Paris Agreement and as parties to the UNFCCC Convention, the Convention on Biological Diversity, which sits squarely under our Ministry as the implementing agency, the Articles of the Conventions, as well as the provisions of the Articles in this international treaty are very clear - we are not the ones that caused the climate crisis. We are the ones that are on the receiving end at the expense of development of other countries.

This is not a blame game. This is about acknowledging historical responsibility. So, on the provision of finance to developing countries concerned, Fiji should not back away from accessing those funding because we are responding to a climate crisis that we did not create. I think it is absolutely clear to put on record that the financial cost that is born out of our fiscal space of our budget, which is almost approximately $500 million due to the 80 percent of that is climate induced events that is caused by cyclones and floods, there are recurring events that

our national infrastructure is not able to uptake and we need to access climate finance in order to supplement what our national development priorities or projects look like.

It is true that we need to grow and stand on our two feet in terms of being able to bounce back, adapt to and withstand the future, but that requires significant levels of investment. Where those investment and the inflow of those funds come from, is important as well and right now, Article 9.1 of the Paris Agreement - Article 20 of the Convention on Biological Diversity, all clearly state that countries that should provide the finance to developing countries because of the historical responsibility should step up, whether bilaterally or multilaterally, they need to step up because we are responding - we are on the responding side of things.

Second to that, I think it is important for us to acknowledge that if we do not access the funding that is available to us, we lose it. It is a competitive based funding – it is not a handover, so we are actually writing proposals to access funding on a competitive basis with every other developing country. If we feel that there are interventions that should be funded through grants, I tell my team that adaptation measures should not be funded through concessional loans, it should be purely funded through grants because we are adapting and these are adaptation interventions that should be part of the package. For example, if we are relocating our communities from a fisherfolk community to our inland, then their livelihood skills from dependence on sea to dependence on land should be part of the interventions that should be funded from the funding that is accessed through grants.

We also think that it is important to acknowledge two important considerations. One is Article IV Mission that is conducted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) which IMF stated in two subsequent Article IV Missions in Fiji, that Fiji's debt to GDP ratio is largely due to climate induced impacts that we face that is not supposed to be left out.

Honourable Mia Mottley, Prime Minister of Barbados, has made this an important part of the Bridgetown Initiative where we do not have 'pause clauses'. When there is a cyclone, there is no pause clauses, we continue paying the debt and interest continues to accumulate. When would the pause clauses come in? That is really important.

Second to that, Fiji qualifies for the International Development Association (IDA) plan. This is squarely under the Ministry of Finance, it is not my duty but I just want to say that Fiji qualifies for IDA-blend only because of our Climate Vulnerability Index, otherwise, because we are an upper middle-income country, we would have only qualified for concessional loans or highly concessional loans. We only qualify for IDA-blend, and honourable Qereqeretabua and I had a consultation in the Climate Investment Fund, and I want to share this experience.

Some 20 months ago, we were sitting in the Climate Investment Fund Trust Fund Committee Meeting where we presented our proposal, which was positioned as 100 percent grant. The entire Climate Investment Fund told us that Fiji is not eligible because of our upper middle income country status. We refuted and we fought back with the provisions of Article IV Mission on IMF and the provision on IDA blend, and we made the SIF Board relook at the pricing policy that they are offering to us. Today, Fiji is able to qualify for 50 percent grant and 50 percent loan under that same pricing policy because if we did not do it, then Kiribati and every other country would have to take loan under this. So, some of us have to step up and change the pricing policy mix that is offered to us because it is not right, it is not just, and if we do not access it, we lose it. That is just simple as that.

However, I fully agree with you, Deputy Chairperson, Sir, that there are aspirations of development that we need to step up, but the sad reality is, all of these development gains are reversed. When we have a cyclone, when we have a flood, halfway through building a bridge, things happen. We have to have additional funding. Where does it come from?

The Government cannot keep digging into their pockets to keep funding for it. Any government, whether it is this government or the future government, we need to think of the additional contingency plan. Who funds it? What is the modality of funding? Whether it comes on concessional, whether it is grants, whether it is something that needs to happen to hold the country's account, and this is what the International Court of Justice has ruled in our favour, that repercussions, remediation for the impacts that we face should be owed to us. I will stop there, but I hope that my Committee members can also come in and speak on the different elements.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- We are very short on time, so keep answers very short.

HON. A. BIA.- A last question from me on Article 12(3) of the Ocean of Peace Alliance, it gives the opportunity, opens the door for any other Pacific Islands country to join by way of unanimous consent by both parties. Speaking of that, do you think that there needs to be clarity, that if anyone joins, there needs to be clarity that funding or allocations that has already been agreed between Australia and Fiji is not affected?

DR. S. MICHAEL.- I think that is based on consultation, if I am on consensus. My understanding is that if such a provision is included, then it would depend on the ministerial level to have that consultation, to see what are the provisions and criterion of that being enforced. I can just leave it there, if that is alright.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- PS, a last small question from me requires a very short answer as well. You have taken us around the globe and, rightfully, people need to know the importance

of climate finance and why Fiji's representation in all these global platforms is important. Looking at this Treaty, we still see issues of burning cane, burning tires, burning waste in a landfill, factories within residential areas polluting air, so under this Treaty, would it help your Ministry improve the enforcement and monitoring mechanisms to Australian standards? Will we be adopting some of the Australian standards in how we, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change works?

DR. S. MICHAEL.- Deputy Chairperson, my short answer to that would be 'no'. Fiji has its own national context, and we should develop laws that suit us. We should not be doing an adoption of processes and procedures because the Australian Government context works at the Federal level and then at the State level and each State has its own way of applying the legislation so there is no one-size-fits-all. I would let the Director of Environment also come in on this, since she is also one of the most important enforcers of the law.

MS. S. NAKORA.- Deputy Chairperson, through you, we did speak about the different legislations that we have. I understand that there is concern around implementation, monitoring and evaluation. That is something that we have worked on internally in the Department in terms of enforcement. We have set up our own Compliance Unit. This is the first, starting from this year and the last financial year, so this is to assist the Department in terms of enforcing all the legislations that we have, for all the approvals that we issue, and ensure that we see that the conditions are followed. I think we did speak on that as well in terms of understanding that this is a Treaty that we envision to have, but nonetheless, there are still national requirements that we intend to follow.

The Nadi Alleviation Project went through the EIA process. We do apply through with those funding arrangements and those projects, there is avenues to issue notices and improvement notices, so we fall back on our national legislations to guide us in terms of environmental protection and enforcement.

Internally, we are trying to improve the efficiency of how we implement these national legislations to ensure that when we get to these arrangements or when these treaties come into force, we in the Department are ready to take on those extra responsibilities, that we have a team that is ready to ensure that national legislations are followed.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you. I absolutely agree. It is important, I guess, that the legislations need to be looked into, again, because it is important to clean our own backyard before we hold someone else accountable.

Thank you so much. I thank the representatives for availing themselves for this submission today. We appreciate your time and cooperation and look forward to your continued engagement should the Committee require any further information.

On that note, Committee Members and submittees, I declare this meeting closed. *Vinaka*.

The Committee Meeting adjourned at 11.27 a.m.

Ministry of Youth and Sports

- **Fiji Association of Sports and National Olympic Committee.**
- **Fiji Rugby Union**
- **Fiji Football Association**

WRITTEN SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION AND OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE (VEITACINI TREATY)

Submitted by: Ministry of Youth and Sports
Date: 18 September 2026

1.0 Executive Summary

The Ministry of Youth and Sports respectfully submits that:

- the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union provides opportunities to strengthen cooperation in **youth development, sport, people-to-people connections, mobility, skills development and social cohesion**;
- the Written Analysis specifically identifies **"Building unity through sport, faith and culture"**, including a proposed **Veimoana Partnership for grassroots and elite Rugby Union**, as one of the transformative initiatives envisaged under the Vuvale Union;
- the Ministry considers that implementation of sports cooperation should, where appropriate, provide opportunities across Fiji's wider sporting sector, while recognising the specific initiative identified for Rugby Union;
- the treaties provide an overarching framework, while the detailed programmes, funding, governance and implementation arrangements for youth and sports initiatives will require further development between the relevant parties; and
- the Ministry considers effective implementation should emphasise **inclusivity, equitable access, measurable outcomes and tangible benefits for young people, athletes, coaches, officials and communities throughout Fiji**.

2.0 Introduction and Ministry Mandate

2.1 The Ministry of Youth and Sports welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence on the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance, also known as the Veitacini Treaty.

2.2 The Ministry's interest in the treaties relates specifically to its mandate for the development and empowerment of young people and the advancement of sport, recreation and physical activity in Fiji.

2.3 The Ministry acknowledges that the broader foreign policy, national security, defence and legal aspects of the treaties fall within the mandates of other responsible Government agencies. Accordingly, this submission focuses on the implications and opportunities arising for Fiji's **youth and sports sectors**.

3.0 Relevance of the Vuvale Union to Youth Development

3.1 The Vuvale Union seeks, among other objectives, to strengthen prosperity and resilience, enhance cultural and people connections, advance climate security and

cultivate and sustain a culture of peace. These objectives are relevant to the development and wellbeing of Fiji's young people.

3.2 The Ministry notes in particular the emphasis on economic and human development and on cultural and people linkages, including through mobility. The treaty framework therefore provides an opportunity to explore deeper cooperation in areas such as youth leadership, skills development, education and training, exchanges, entrepreneurship, volunteering and other people-to-people initiatives.

3.3 The Ministry considers that young people should not simply be beneficiaries of cooperation under the Vuvale Union but, where appropriate, should be provided opportunities to participate in initiatives that contribute to stronger Fiji-Australia and Pacific relationships.

4.0 Sport as a Platform for Cooperation

4.1 Of particular relevance to the Ministry is the Written Analysis accompanying the treaties, which identifies **"Building unity through sport, faith and culture"** as one of the proposed transformative initiatives. It specifically refers to a **Veimoana Partnership for grassroots and elite Rugby Union**, together with pathways involving faith and traditional leaders to strengthen social cohesion and connections between Fiji, Australia and the wider region.

4.2 The Ministry recognises sport as an important platform for strengthening people-to-people relationships. At the community level, sport can support participation, healthy lifestyles, youth engagement and social cohesion. At the performance level, international cooperation can strengthen athlete, coach, technical official and institutional development.

4.3 The proposed cooperation provides an opportunity to explore practical initiatives including:

- grassroots and community sports development;
- elite athlete development and high-performance pathways;
- coaching, officiating and sports administration development;
- sports science, sports medicine and high-performance technical support;
- exchanges, attachments, training and competition opportunities;
- development of women and girls in sport, para-sport and inclusive participation; and
- strengthening institutional capability and sporting infrastructure where mutually agreed.

4.4 While the Written Analysis specifically identifies Rugby Union, the Ministry considers that implementation discussions should also examine opportunities for broader sports cooperation, where appropriate and mutually agreed. This would enable other sporting organisations and athletes to potentially benefit from the wider people-to-people and development objectives of the Vuvale Union.

5.0 Opportunities for Fiji's Youth and Athletes

5.1 The Ministry considers that implementation of the Vuvale Union could provide opportunities to deepen pathways between Fiji and Australia for young people, athletes, coaches, officials, administrators and sporting organisations.

5.2 Particular attention should be given to ensuring that opportunities are inclusive and accessible. This includes consideration of young people and athletes from **rural and maritime communities, women and girls, persons with disabilities and communities that may otherwise have limited access to international development opportunities**.

5.3 Sports cooperation may also contribute to broader youth development by creating opportunities around sports entrepreneurship, events, leadership, volunteering, digital innovation and associated employment and skills development.

6.0 Ocean of Peace Alliance – Veitacini Treaty

6.1 The Ministry notes that the Veitacini Treaty primarily addresses sovereignty, mutual defence, security cooperation and Pacific regional stability. Its stated purpose is to protect the sovereignty of the Parties, secure their mutual defence and security interests and contribute to the stability and security of the Pacific.

6.2 While these matters fall principally outside the Ministry's mandate, a peaceful, secure and resilient Pacific provides an important enabling environment for youth development, sporting participation and stronger regional people-to-people relationships.

6.3 The Ministry further recognises the potential contribution of youth engagement and sport to peacebuilding, mutual understanding, community resilience and social cohesion.

7.0 Implementation Considerations

7.1 The Ministry notes that the Written Analysis envisages resourcing for infrastructure, capacity-building, capability improvement and technical assistance, subject to policy priorities.

7.2 From a youth and sports perspective, the Ministry considers that subsequent implementation arrangements should clearly establish:

(a) agreed priorities and expected outcomes;
(b) the respective responsibilities of Fiji and Australia;
(c) governance and coordination arrangements;
(d) funding and resource commitments;
(e) consultation with relevant youth and sporting stakeholders;
(f) equitable access to opportunities; and
(g) appropriate monitoring, evaluation and reporting mechanisms.

7.3 The Ministry also considers it important to distinguish between commitments contained directly in the treaties and specific initiatives proposed for implementation. For example, the proposed Veimoana Partnership is identified in the Written Analysis as a transformative initiative. Its detailed scope, governance, resourcing and implementation arrangements would therefore need to be further developed by the relevant parties.

8.0 Conclusion

8.1 The Ministry of Youth and Sports recognises the relevance of the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union to Fiji's youth and sports sectors, particularly through its emphasis on people-to-people connections, prosperity, resilience, mobility and social cohesion.

8.2 The Ministry particularly welcomes the recognition of **sport as a means of building unity and strengthening relationships between Fiji and Australia** and notes the opportunities presented through the proposed Veimoana Partnership and other possible forms of sports cooperation.

8.3 The Ministry considers that implementation should seek tangible and measurable outcomes for Fiji's young people and sporting community, while ensuring inclusivity, equitable access, appropriate governance and alignment with Fiji's national youth and sports development priorities.

8.4 The Ministry stands ready to work with the relevant Government agencies, the Australian Government, national sporting organisations and other stakeholders to translate relevant commitments under the Vuvale Union into practical opportunities that strengthen Fiji's youth and sports sectors and contribute to stronger Fiji-Australia and Pacific relationships.

Respectfully submitted,

Permanent Secretary
Ministry of Youth and Sports
Republic of Fiji

FIJI ASSOCIATION OF SPORTS & NATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEE

The Chair

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defense

Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance

RE: FIJI ASSOCIATION FOR SPORT AND NATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEE (FASANOC)

Dear Sir,

FASANOC thanks the Standing Committee for the opportunity to submit an oral submission on the 21st September 2026. We now submit our formal written submission.

Background: FASANOC is Fiji's National Olympic Committee and the umbrella body that supports, develops and represents the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Commonwealth Sport (CS), Pacific Games Council (PGC).

All National Federations for sporting organisations in Fiji are affiliated to FASANOC.

This submission is on behalf of our 49 member National Federations.

We hope that our submission will be given due consideration.

Yours sincerely,



Cathy Wong-OF

FASANOC President

2nd October 2026

Encl: Attachment 1: Executive summary

Attachment 2: Full submission

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Attachment 1

FASANOC SUBMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE

Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

5 October 2026

Madam Chair, Honourable Members of the Standing Committee,

FASANOC welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's consideration of the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance.

Our proposition is to use sport as a practical, reciprocal way to give effect to the Vuvale Union: connecting people and institutions in both countries, improving mobility and human development, creating economic, health, community and tourism value, and building a shared Brisbane 2032 legacy for Fiji, Australia and the wider Pacific.

CORE PROPOSITION: Develop a five-year Fiji-Australia Olympic & Paralympic Partnership from July 2027 to June 2032 as a practical implementing initiative under the Vuvale Union Work Plan, supported by A$22.06 million in Australian Government investment and a dedicated Olympic and Paralympic mobility policy pathway.

Why this fits the Vuvale Union

The Vuvale Union commits Fiji and Australia to strengthen prosperity and resilience, deepen cultural and people connections, advance human development, enhance mobility settings and deepen economic links. It also requires the relationship to be considered in the interests of both countries and the wider Pacific.

Sport is already part of the bilateral relationship. The 2023 Vuvale Partnership specifically recognised sports diplomacy, pathways for Fijian teams into Australian and international competition, including Brisbane 2032, and high-performance opportunities for Fijian athletes and coaches. The proposed Partnership would convert those commitments into a structured programme with clear roles, measurable outcomes and long-term capability.

A reciprocal partnership - value to both countries

This should not be viewed as a one-way development programme. It also gives Australia a practical platform for its own Sports Diplomacy Strategy 2032+, which focuses on the Indo-Pacific, people-to-people ties, gender and disability inclusion, regional resilience, economic opportunity and Australian leadership in sport.

- **For Fiji:** stronger athlete, coach and technical pathways; better access to competition and performance support; stronger National Federations and major-event capability; increased physical activity; and capability that remains in Fiji beyond 2032.
- **For Australia:** sustained engagement with one of its closest Pacific partners; deeper institutional relationships for Australian sporting organisations, universities and specialists; professional and commercial opportunities; and a visible Pacific legacy from Brisbane 2032.
- **For both countries:** two-way movement of athletes, coaches, officials, teams and practitioners; stronger sports tourism and economic links; shared knowledge; healthier and more connected communities; and more durable people-to-people relationships.

A proven platform for the Olympic and Paralympic Decade

Fiji has already demonstrated its international sporting potential. Fiji athletes have won Olympic and Paralympic gold, achieved success at World Championships and competed at the highest international level across the broadest range of Olympic sports in the Pacific Islands. The ambition is to convert that potential into greater depth and consistency: more athletes qualifying, more sports represented, stronger individual and team pathways, more finalists and Top 8 performances, and genuine medal prospects across a broader range of Olympic and Paralympic sports.

Fiji is not starting from scratch. Athletes, National Federations and development pathways already exist. Brisbane 2032 creates a unique five-year window for Fiji and Australia to build on Australia's substantial existing investment in Fiji sport by extending cooperation across the wider Olympic and Paralympic system. Strategic investment beginning now can strengthen coaching, competition, high-performance environments, professional Federation capacity, sports science and performance support, helping create a stronger and more balanced sporting ecosystem and capability that lasts well beyond the Games.

The proposed partnership

FASANOC proposes cooperation across eight linked areas, supported by Australian Government investment of A$22.06 million over five years together with the Olympic and Paralympic mobility policy ask:

- Athlete scholarships, education and Australian high-performance placements, with FASANOC and the relevant National Federation involved in identifying and endorsing participants.
- Australian competition and international qualification pathways for a wider pool of Fiji athletes.
- Coach development and professional placements, including a Fiji NextGen Coaching Programme for at least 20 coaches annually, combined with Australian mentoring, placements and high-performance exposure.
- National high-performance capacity, athlete pathways and National Federation development.
- Sports science, sports medicine and performance-support development.
- A fit-for-purpose Olympic and Paralympic mobility pathway.

- Major Events Organisation, Capacity & Economic Multiplier: establish a permanent FASANOC-led Major Events Organisation, working with Government and National Federations, to retain and multiply Fiji's proven eventdelivery capability, build a larger and more diverse international event programme, and generate tourism, economic and sporting returns.
- Active Fiji - a whole-of-nation physical activity movement using Brisbane 2032 to increase regular physical activity, contribute to Fiji's response to the NCD challenge, improve wellbeing and create a visible Oceania legacy beyond elite sport.

Cross-cutting opportunities

- Training partnerships in Fiji: develop Australian team training and preparation opportunities while progressively strengthening suitable facilities, athlete services and workforce capability.
- Sports capability assessment: undertake a technical assessment of Fiji's existing facilities, high-performance services, accessibility and readiness for international training and competition, identifying existing strengths, priority gaps and targeted investment for training hubs, competition readiness and sports-tourism development.
- Olympic, Paralympic and inclusive sport: build deliberate pathways for women and girls and athletes with disabilities across competition, coaching, mobility and performance support.
- Sports tourism and Brisbane 2032: position Fiji as a complementary regional training and visitor destination for Australian and international teams and Games-related travellers, supporting additional visitation, visitor nights and expenditure.
- Long-term legacy: ensure every component leaves stronger skills, systems and institutional capacity within FASANOC, National Federations and Fiji's wider sporting system beyond 2032.

How the Partnership gives effect to the Vuvale Union

Vuvale commitment	Relevant Vuvale Union Article	Practical contribution
People and institutional connections	**Article 2(2)(b)** – enhance cultural and people connections; **Article 3(2)** – deepen links between the peoples of Fiji and Australia	Sustained relationships between athletes, coaches, officials, Federations, universities, sporting bodies and specialists in both countries.
Mobility	**Article 3(3)(c)** – deepen cultural and people linkages, including through mobility; **Article 3(7)** – enhance mobility settings	Structured, accountable movement of approved athletes, coaches and technical personnel, together with reciprocal team and training activity.
Human development	**Article 3(3)** – deepen the economic and human development partnership; **Article 3(4)** – recognises quality education and healthcare as important to economic growth and security	Education, coaching, technical development, sports medicine, athlete wellbeing and professional exchanges.

Economic integration	**Article 3(2)** – integrate the economies of Fiji & Australia; **Article 3(3)(a)** – enhance economic growth and security; **Article 5(1)(d)** – deepen rules-based trade and investment between regional economies	Sports tourism, training camps, major events, Australian and Fiji institutional partnerships, services, procurement, visitor expenditure and commercial opportunities.
Gender equality and inclusion	**Article 3(1)** – inclusive development centred on economic, social, environmental and human dignity; **Article 3(4)** – expressly recognises gender equality	Deliberate pathways for women and girls, Para athletes and people with disabilities, with accessibility built into programme design.
Pacific cooperation and resilience	**Article 2(2)(a)** – strengthen prosperity and resilience; **Article 2(3)** – consider the interests of the peoples of the Pacific region; **Article 5(1)(e)** – ensure Vuvale cooperation contributes to wider Pacific development and security	A practical Brisbane 2032 legacy model supporting sporting capability, community participation, resilience and learning that can contribute to the wider Pacific.
Long-term implementation	**Article 2(1)** – progressively deepen and evolve the Vuvale Union; **Article 7(4)** – Vuvale Union Work Plan for phased, long-term implementation; **Article 11(1)** – subsidiary agreements and implementing arrangements	Skills, systems and institutional capacity retained in Fiji beyond 2032, rather than short-term or event-only support.

Immediate priorities

- Commence the Sports Capability Assessment to establish Fiji's existing strengths, priority gaps and readiness for international training, competition and sports-tourism development.
- Begin work on the Olympic and Paralympic mobility pathway early enough to support Los Angeles 2028 and Brisbane 2032 preparation.
- Establish a joint process for identifying athletes, coaches and technical personnel for Australian opportunities, with FASANOC and the relevant National Federation directly involved.
- Identify Australian and regional partners for high-performance training, coaching, sports science, team preparation, major events and sports-tourism initiatives.
- Partner with FASANOC to establish the permanent Major Events Organisation, enabling Fiji to systematically identify, attract, secure, coordinate and leverage a larger and more diverse programme of international sporting events.
- Begin implementation planning for the five-year A$22.06 million Partnership through agreed workplans, governance arrangements and accountability mechanisms.

Implementation pathway

FASANOC proposes that the Partnership be considered for inclusion in the Vuvale Union Work Plan overseen by the Vuvale Bukmak. If agreed by both Governments, an implementing arrangement could set out programme scope, governance, funding, roles, selection and endorsement processes, safeguards, annual workplans and accountability.

The Partnership should operate as one bilateral programme rather than a collection of unrelated grants. FASANOC would work with National Federations and relevant Fiji agencies, while Australian and Oceania sporting organisations, education and health institutions, tourism and event partners, and other specialists participate as delivery partners. Implementation would be guided by annual workplans, agreed budgets, measurable outcomes and transparent accountability.

Closing proposition

Brisbane 2032 provides a practical deadline, but the purpose is larger than one Games. The opportunity is to use sport to build stronger Fiji capability while creating two-way sporting, institutional, economic, health, community, tourism and people-to-people value with Australia.

THE ASK: Work with FASANOC to develop and support the Fiji-Australia Olympic & Paralympic Partnership 2027-2032 as a reciprocal implementing initiative under the Vuvale Union, including A$22.06 million over five years and the Olympic and Paralympic mobility policy commitment, with Brisbane 2032 as the catalyst and lasting capability and relationships as the legacy.

Attachment 2

FIJI-AUSTRALIA OLYMPIC & PARALYMPIC PARTNERSHIP 2027-2032

FASANOC Proposal under the Vuvale Union

Main proposal | 5 October 2026

PURPOSE: A reciprocal five-year sporting partnership under the Vuvale Union, using Brisbane 2032 to strengthen Fiji's sporting system while creating two-way institutional, mobility, tourism, economic and peopleto-people value for Fiji and Australia.

1. Executive summary

Fiji and Australia have already agreed that sport forms part of the Vuvale relationship. The 2023 Vuvale Partnership recognised sports diplomacy, pathways into Australian and international competition - including Brisbane 2032 - and high-performance opportunities for Fijian athletes and coaches. The 2026 Vuvale Union provides a broader framework around people, mobility, human development, economic integration, resilience and long-term institutional cooperation.

This proposal turns those commitments into a practical five-year programme. It is designed around Fiji's established Olympic and Paralympic system, Australia's sporting and high-performance capability, and the opportunities created by Brisbane 2032.

The underlying issue is not a lack of Fiji talent. It is the depth and consistency of the system around that talent: coaching, competition, Federation capacity, performance support, mobility and access to quality daily training environments. The Partnership addresses those gaps while deliberately creating reciprocal opportunities for Australian teams, sporting organisations, universities, practitioners and businesses to engage with Fiji.

PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLE: Fiji talent and Australian capability, connected through a two-way partnership that builds lasting skills, systems and relationships in both countries.

Why this matters to Australia

The Partnership is not proposed simply as Australian assistance to Fiji. It also provides Australia with a practical platform to deliver its Sports Diplomacy Strategy 2032+ in one of its closest Pacific relationships and to demonstrate a tangible Pacific legacy from Brisbane 2032.

- Sustained institutional relationships for Australian National and State Sporting Organisations, universities, high-performance institutes, coaches, practitioners and event specialists.
- Professional exchange and international experience for Australian coaches, technical personnel, sports-science practitioners and event professionals.

- Opportunities for Australian teams and sporting organisations to train in Fiji, supporting two-way sporting mobility and stronger regional connections.
- Sports tourism, education, professional-services and commercial opportunities associated with training, events, travel and institutional partnerships.
- A visible Brisbane 2032 Oceania legacy based on long-term capability transfer, inclusion and people-to-people engagement rather than one-off activity.

How the Partnership gives effect to the Vuvale Union

Vuvale commitment	Partnership contribution
Prosperity and resilience	Stronger sporting institutions, workforce capability, sports tourism, community participation and sustainable local systems.
People connections and mobility	Two-way movement of athletes, coaches, officials, teams and specialists, backed by long-term institutional relationships.
Human development, education and healthcare	Education pathways, coach and practitioner development, sports medicine, athlete wellbeing and physical activity.
Economic integration and trade	Training camps, sports tourism, procurement, education and professional-services relationships, and Brisbane 2032 networks.
Gender equality and inclusion	Women and girls, Para athletes and people with disabilities deliberately included across pathways, services and capability development.
Pacific regional benefit	A Fiji-based Games for Oceania legacy with learning, pathways and institutional relationships that can contribute regionally.
Long-term implementation	A five-year programme designed to leave capability in FASANOC, National Federations and Fiji's wider sporting system beyond 2032.

2. Partnership architecture

The Partnership combines eight programme pillars with four cross-cutting priorities. The pillars address the core sporting system; the cross-cutting priorities ensure that the programme is reciprocal, evidence-based, inclusive and sustainable.

Pillar	Core purpose	Current planning provision
1	Athlete Scholarships, Education & Australian High-Performance Training Placements	A$3.92m
2	Australian Competition & International Qualification Pathways	A$3.00m
3	Coach Development & Professional Placements	A$1.25m
4	National High-Performance Capacity, Athlete Pathways & Federation Development	A$6.49m
5	Performance Support, Sports Science, Medicine & Workforce Development	A$1.35m
6	Long-Term Flexible Olympic & Paralympic Mobility Pathway	Policy ask
7	Major-Events & Economic Multiplier	A$3.55m
8	Active Fiji: Whole-of-Nation Physical Activity Movement	A$2.50m

The Partnership seeks Australian Government investment of A$22.06 million over five years, together with the Olympic and Paralympic mobility policy ask. Funding would be implemented

progressively through agreed annual workplans, approved programme arrangements and accountability mechanisms.

Cross-cutting priorities

Priority	What it means
Training partnerships & international training hubs	Explore opportunities for Australian teams and sporting organisations to train in Fiji and progressively identify and develop suitable facilities and services as international
Priority	**What it means**
	training hubs. The wider FASANOC strategy will extend this to other regional and international teams.
Sports Capability Assessment	A technical assessment of Fiji's existing sporting facilities, high-performance services, accessibility, athlete services and readiness to host international training and competition. The assessment would identify existing strengths, priority gaps and targeted investments required to expand Fiji's international training, competition and high-performance capability.
Sports tourism & Brisbane 2032	Use training, preparation, sporting travel and Games-related movement to encourage Australian and International sporting teams, sporting groups and visitors to include Fiji in regional programmes, and to position Fiji for selected pre-Games and post-event activity.
Inclusive sport & longterm legacy	Build women and girls, Para athletes and people with disabilities into programme design, while ensuring skills, systems and institutional capability remain within Fiji beyond 2032.

A Proven Platform for the Olympic and Paralympic Decade

Fiji has already demonstrated its international sporting potential. Fiji athletes have won Olympic and Paralympic gold, achieved success at World Championships and competed at the highest international level across the broadest range of Olympic sports in the Pacific Islands. Behind those results is a much wider pool of talent, ambition and national commitment to sport.

The ambition is to convert that potential into greater depth and consistency: more athletes qualifying, more sports represented, stronger individual and team pathways, more finalists and Top 8 performances, and genuine medal prospects across a broader range of Olympic and Paralympic sports.

Fiji is not starting from scratch. Athletes, National Federations and development pathways already exist. The opportunity is to strengthen the system around them through sustained investment in coaching, competition, quality daily training environments, professional Federation capacity, sports science and performance support.

Brisbane 2032 creates a unique five-year window for Fiji and Australia to do this together. It provides a clear performance horizon and an opportunity to build on Australia's substantial

existing investment in Fiji sport by extending cooperation across the wider Olympic and Paralympic system, helping create a stronger and more balanced sporting ecosystem in which more sports have the capacity, pathways and opportunity to realise their potential. Investment beginning now can strengthen the people, institutions and pathways needed not only for Brisbane 2032, but for future Games cycles.

Australia would therefore be investing in demonstrated potential rather than an untested proposition. Fiji brings talent, sporting culture, established institutions and ambition; Australia brings complementary high-performance capability, competition, education, expertise and access. Through the Vuvale Partnership, those strengths can be combined to create lasting sporting capability in Fiji and a visible Brisbane 2032 legacy for both countries.

3. Detailed programme design

PILLAR 1

Athlete Scholarships, Education & Australian High-Performance Placements

Give Fiji's priority Olympic and Paralympic pathway athletes sustained access to quality Australian daily training environments, education and personal development.

VUVALE ALIGNMENT: People connections, mobility, education and human development; consistent with the 2023 commitment to high-performance pathways for Fijian athletes and coaches.

Why this matters

Fiji has repeatedly shown that talented athletes can make significant performance gains when they have sustained access to quality coaching, training partners, competition and high-performance support. The challenge is that these opportunities have largely depended on individual arrangements rather than a structured national pathway. This Pillar would turn those isolated opportunities into a deliberate system, giving Fiji's highest-potential athletes the daily training environments needed to progress towards international finals and medal contention.

Programme design

- **Two pathways:** Education & Training placements and High-Performance Training placements.
- FASANOC and the relevant National Federation jointly identify, assess and endorse athletes for opportunities against agreed performance criteria and Individual Athlete Performance Plans.
- Placements use appropriate Australian sporting organisations, clubs, universities, TAFE/TVET institutions, schools, coaches and high-performance environments.
- Each athlete plan covers coaching, training, competition, performance support, education where applicable, living and personal circumstances, wellbeing, welfare, safeguarding and measurable annual outcomes.

- Australian value-in-kind contributions are pursued for education, accommodation, coaching, facilities, specialist services, competition and equipment.

	2027-28	2028-29	2029-30	2030-31	2031-32	5-year total
Total athletes	6	12	20	30	30	30 in total
Average annual cash support	A$40k	A$40k	A$40k	A$40k	A$40k	A$40K
Annual provision	A$240k	A$480k	A$800k	A$1.20m	A$1.20m	A$3.92

Australian Government ask

- Provide A$3.92 million over five years to support approved athlete education, training and high-performance placements.
- Help mobilise Australian education, sporting and high-performance partners.
- Align placements with the proposed mobility pathway.

The Outcome

From 2027, a progressively larger cohort of Fiji's highest-potential Olympic and Paralympic athletes will be based in Australia, immersed year-round in quality high-performance training and competition environments, with access to coaching, training partners and performance support capable of taking them towards international finals, Top 8 performances and genuine medal contention at Brisbane 2032.

PILLAR 2

Australian Competition & International Qualification Pathways

Broaden Fiji's performance pipeline through regular access to stronger Australian competition and, where required, higher-level international qualification opportunities.

VUVALE ALIGNMENT: People connections and mobility; supports pathways into Australian and international competition, including Brisbane 2032.

Why this matters

Fiji cannot build a stronger Brisbane 2032 team by investing only in the athletes who are already leading today. A much broader group of emerging and developing athletes need regular exposure to stronger competition so their potential can be tested, developed and compared against international standards. Australian competition provides a practical and cost-effective pathway for Fiji to deepen its athlete pool and identify those capable of progressing towards qualification and world-class performance.

Programme design

- Begin with 40 athletes in 2027-28 and grow to 80 in 2031-32.
- Use planned Australian training and competition blocks tailored to each sport and athlete pathway.
- Allow coordinated coach and technical support where this improves athlete outcomes.
- Support targeted competition-circuits required for performance progression, ranking, qualification and majorGames preparation.
- FASANOC and relevant National Federations approve participants and competition plans against agreed performance criteria.

	2027-28	2028-29	2029-30	2030-31	2031-32	5-year total
Athletes supported	40	50	60	70	80	80 in total
Average annual provision	A$10k	A$10k	A$10k	A$10k	A$10k	A$10K
Annual provision	A$400k	A$500k	A$600k	A$700k	A$800k	A$3.0m

Australian Government ask

- Provide A$3.00 million over five years to support Australian competition, training and international qualification pathways.
- Mobilise Australian sporting system to encourage access to suitable Australian competition, training groups, coaches, facilities and services.

The Outcome:

From 2027, a progressively larger pool of predominantly Fiji-based athletes, growing from 40 to 80 annually, will have regular access to stronger Australian competition and short training blocks, creating a deeper and more competitive performance pipeline and stronger qualification pathways towards Brisbane 2032.

PILLAR 3

Coach Development and Professional Placements

Build the depth and quality of Fiji coaches through structured development, mentoring and professional placements.

VUVALE ALIGNMENT:
Human development, education and people-to-people connections, using Australia's coaching and highperformance expertise to build sustainable capability within Fiji's National Federations.

Why this matters

Fiji cannot substantially increase the number of athletes capable of competing internationally without also increasing the depth and quality of the coaches who develop them. Occasional individual coaching opportunities will not create the critical mass required across Fiji's Olympic and Paralympic sports. The objective is therefore to build a sustained pipeline of Fiji coaches capable of applying contemporary high-performance practice within their own Federations and athlete pathways.

Programme design

- Recruit annual cohorts of emerging and high-performing coaches from priority Olympic & Paralympic sports.
- Deliver a structured Fiji NextGen Coaching Programme for at least 20 coaches annually, providing contemporary high-performance coaching education, practical development and cross-sport learning in Fiji.
- Complement the Fiji-based programme with Australian professional placements, mentoring and practical highperformance exposure.
- Prioritise participants who will apply and share learning within their National Federation and athlete pathway.
- Provide deliberate opportunities for women, Para coaches and officials, and personnel supporting athletes with disabilities.

Five-year Australian Government Investment

2027-28	2028-29	2029-30	2030-31	2031-32	5-Year Total
A$250k	A$250k	A$250k	A$250k	A$250k	A$1.25m

Australian Government ask

- Provide A$1.25 million over five years to support the Fiji Coach Development & Professional Placements Programme.
- Help mobilise the AIS, State Academies and Institutes, National Sporting Organisations, high-performance programmes and leading Australian coaches as programme partners, mentors and placement hosts

- Support the design and delivery of the five-year Fiji coaching programme and Australian professional placements.
- Facilitate appropriate Australian high-performance attachments and professional learning opportunities for participating Fiji coaches.

The Outcome:

From 2027, a purpose-built Fiji NextGen Coaching Programme will develop at least 20 coaches each year and 100 over five years, combining Fiji-based development with Australian high-performance mentoring, professional placements and immersion to build a critical mass of Fiji coaches capable of developing athletes through to international and world-class performance.

PILLAR 4

National High-Performance Capacity, Athlete Pathways & Federation Development

Strengthen the national and Federation-level people, systems and domestic pathways needed to convert sporting talent into sustained international performance.

VUVALE ALIGNMENT:

Delivered through institutional strengthening, capacity and capability development and stronger pathways towards building a Fiji system capable of sustaining a wider investment.

Why this matters

Investment in athletes, coaches and international opportunities will not be sustainable if the National Federations responsible for identifying and developing those athletes lack the professional capacity to maintain the pathway. Strong Federations are therefore fundamental to the success of every other Pillar. This investment is intended to ensure that new opportunities translate into stronger domestic systems rather than remaining isolated programmes or individual successes.

Programme design

- Build a lean FASANOC high-performance delivery team with coordination capability and clear performance responsibilities.
- Supplement National Federation capacity in priority sports where athlete pathways cannot otherwise be delivered consistently.
- Establish and maintain Elite, Emerging and Youth/Next Generation talent pools covering Olympic and Paralympic athletes.
- Strengthen domestic school, age-group, club, district, regional and national competition as connected talent pathways.
- Ring-fence specialist Para requirements including classification, adaptive equipment, accessibility, technical expertise and competition access.

Proposed Five-Year Growth and Australian Government Investment

Component	202728	2028-29	2029-30	2030-31	2031-32	5-year total
FASANOC HP Delivery Team	2	2	3	3	3	3
Funding Provision	A$200k	A$200k	A$300k	A$300,000	A$300k	A$1.3m
Federation HP/ Development Administrators	9	12	15	15	15	15
Funding Provision	A$360k	A$480k	A$600k	A$600,000	A$600k	A$2.64m
Domestic Comp & Talent Pathways Fund	A$200k	A$300k	A$400k	A$400,000	A$400k	A$1.7m
Targeted Para-Specific Requirements	A$100k	A$150k	A$200k	A$200,000	A$200k	A$0.85m
Total Annual Provision	**A$860k**	**A$1.13m**	**A$1.50m**	**A$1.50m**	**A$1.50m**	**A$6.49m**

Australian Government ask

- A$6.49 million over five years, progressively deployed in line with agreed roles, Federation readiness and annual workplans.

The Outcome:

Stronger National Federations, the lifeblood of Fiji's sporting ecosystem, supported by stronger FASANOC highperformance coordination, with new professional positions to supplement existing Federation capacity, and

stronger domestic competition and athlete pathways capable of identifying, developing and supporting significantly more athletes towards Brisbane 2032.

PILLAR 5

Performance Support, Sports Science, Medicine & Workforce Development

Provide priority athletes with consistent year-round, quality high-performance support while developing a sustainable Fiji sports-science, medicine and performance workforce.

VUVALE ALIGNMENT: Healthcare, education and human development; combines athlete support with Fiji workforce development.

Why this matters

International performance is built through consistent support throughout the year, not services assembled only after an athlete has qualified or a Games team has been selected. Fiji's priority athletes need regular access to sports science, medicine, rehabilitation, nutrition, psychology, testing and performance analysis as part of their everyday development. At the same time, Fiji must progressively build the practitioners capable of delivering more of these services locally.

Programme design

- Provide planned strength and conditioning, physiotherapy, sports medicine, nutrition, performance psychology, recovery, physiology, biomechanics, testing and performance analysis according to athlete need.
- Create a Network of Practitioners, utilising competent Fiji providers and institutions wherever appropriate, with Australian specialists filling genuine gaps.
- Develop Fiji practitioners through professional development, practical athlete work, accreditation, mentoring and Australian attachments.
- Ensure women athletes and Para athletes have appropriate, accessible and sport-specific support.
- Develop integrated athlete performance plans, using testing, benchmarking and ongoing monitoring to guide athlete development, performance support and programme decisions.

Five-year Australian Government Investment

2027-28	2028-29	2029-30	2030-31	2031-32	5-Year Total
A$200k	A$250k	A$300k	A$300k	A$300k	A$1.35m

Australian Government ask

- Provide A$1.35 million over five years to support the development of Fiji's sports science, sports medicine and performance-support workforce.
- Facilitate Australian specialist visits, remote support, mentoring, attachments and advanced testing where required.

The Outcome:

Build Fiji's sports science, sports medicine and performance-support workforce from 2027, creating an active national network of practitioners capable of progressively delivering holistic, year-round performance support to more priority athletes through to Brisbane 2032.

PILLAR 6

Long-Term Flexible Olympic & Paralympic Mobility Pathway

Create a stable and flexible long-term Australian visa pathway that enables Fiji's approved priority athletes and coaches to build their lives around sustained high-performance sport in Australia through to Brisbane 2032.

VUVALE ALIGNMENT: Article 3 directly recognises mobility and enhanced mobility settings. This is one of the clearest direct links between the programme and the Vuvale Union.

Why this matters

High-performance development depends on continuity. Athletes cannot build sustained training programmes if access to Australian coaches, competitions, education and support services is repeatedly interrupted by short-term immigration arrangements. A stable mobility pathway would allow Fiji's priority athletes to establish the long-term training environments needed for Los Angeles 2028 and Brisbane 2032, while giving the wider Fiji sporting cohort reliable recurring access to Australian competition and development opportunities.

Policy design

- Create long-term arrangements for a small number of priority athletes and streamlined multi-year, multipleentry access for a wider group of athletes, coaches and essential technical personnel.
- Provide the functionality for approved athletes to train and compete in Australia, study as domestic students, undertake limited work and access Medicare or equivalent affordable health cover.
- Provide appropriate family accompaniment arrangements for the very small number of priority athletes who require them, together with streamlined recurring access for the wider Fiji sporting cohort.
- Keep eligibility controlled through FASANOC and National Federation endorsement, with confirmation from the relevant Australian sporting counterpart where appropriate.
- Establish the pathway as an early priority, enabling athletes to benefit immediately in the lead-up to Los Angeles 2028 and Brisbane 2032.

Australian Government ask

- Develop a dedicated or tailored Olympic and Paralympic mobility mechanism providing the required functionality through Brisbane 2032.



The Outcome:

A stable and flexible visa pathway enabling Fiji's priority athletes to build their lives around high-performance sport, while providing the wider Fiji sporting cohort with reliable recurring access to Australian training and competition.

PILLAR 7

Major Events Organisation, Capacity & Economic Multiplier

Working with Government and National Federations, establish a permanent FASANOC-led Major Events Organisation from 2027 to retain and multiply Fiji's proven event-delivery capability and capitalise on the five-year runway to Brisbane 2032 and beyond.

VUVALE ALIGNMENT: Prosperity, economic integration, people and institutional links, skills development and wider Pacific cooperation. Major international sport provides an opportunity to convert sporting capability into tourism, employment, business activity, international exposure and stronger Fiji–Australia institutional relationships.

Why this matters

Fiji has demonstrated over many years that it can successfully deliver high-quality international sporting events. FASANOC and Fiji's National Federations have accumulated substantial event experience, systems and relationships across multiple sports.

The principal gap is not basic event-delivery knowledge. It is the absence of a permanent mechanism that retains this capability between events and uses it systematically to identify opportunities, build relationships with International Federations and event owners, develop bids, secure events, coordinate delivery support and maximise their sporting and economic value.

At present, individual Federations are often required to rebuild teams, systems, supplier relationships and event capability for each new opportunity. The Partnership would create a multiplier effect by retaining, strengthening and reusing that capability across Fiji's sporting system.

Programme design

- Establish a permanent FASANOC-led Major Events Organisation, working in partnership with Government, National Federations and other relevant stakeholders.
- Build and maintain a multi-year pipeline of international sporting events, including Olympic and Paralympic qualification events, international championships, training camps and other strategically valuable opportunities.
- Progressively expand Fiji's international sporting events programme beyond established rugby and football platforms, creating substantially more opportunities across Olympic and Paralympic sports.

- Support National Federations with event identification, feasibility, bidding, Government coordination, sponsorship and commercial development, accreditation, broadcasting, venue operations, logistics, workforce and volunteer systems.
- Retain reusable systems, supplier relationships, technology, templates, commercial models and institutional knowledge between events.
- Use Australian and Brisbane 2032 relationships to expand international networks, market access, professional partnerships and targeted specialist support where this adds value.
- Strengthen event-related workforce capability through placements, exchanges and practical experience in Fiji and Australia.
- Integrate major-event activity with sports tourism, international training hubs and Brisbane 2032 opportunities.
- Measure sporting, tourism, economic, employment and capability outcomes so that the value generated through major events can support the case for continued investment in Fiji sport.

The economic multiplier

Major international sporting events should not be viewed only as a cost to Fiji. Properly selected, secured and leveraged events can generate visitor expenditure, aviation demand, accommodation, local procurement, employment, commercial activity and international exposure. This creates a strategic opportunity for sport not only to seek investment, but to generate wider economic value that strengthens the case for sustained investment back into Fiji's sporting system.

Five-year Australian Government Investment

2027-28	2028-29	2029-30	2030-31	2031-32	5-Year Total
A$300k	A$500k	A$750k	A$1.0m	A$1.0m	A$3.55m

Australian Government ask

- Provide A$3.55 million over five years to establish and develop the Major Events Organisation, build Fiji's international event pipeline, strengthen reusable event systems and workforce capacity, support international market engagement and bidding, and maximise the sporting and economic value generated through major international events.
- Support connections with Australian sporting bodies, event organisations, Brisbane 2032, Government agencies and other relevant partners where these relationships can strengthen Fiji's event pipeline, professional capability, commercial development and international reach.

The Outcome:

A permanent FASANOC-led Major Events Organisation enabling Fiji to sustain a significantly larger and more diverse programme of quality international sporting events each year, particularly across Olympic and Paralympic sports, generating greater tourism, economic activity, investment, employment, commercial opportunity and international exposure.

PILLAR 8

Active Fiji: Whole-of-Nation Physical Activity Movement

Create a flagship Fiji–Australia Oceania Legacy initiative, using Brisbane 2032 as the catalyst for a sustained national movement to get Fiji moving and build a healthier, more active and more productive nation.

VUVALE ALIGNMENT: Resilience, human development, healthcare and people connections; provides a visible Games for Oceania legacy beyond elite sport.

Why this matters

Fiji's major health challenge cannot be addressed through elite sport alone. Increasing regular physical activity across the population is an important part of building healthier communities, improving wellbeing and supporting people to remain active and productive for longer. The challenge is to make movement part of everyday life, not something limited to organised sport or occasional campaigns.

Active Fiji would use the momentum of Brisbane 2032 to create a visible national movement connecting schools, workplaces, villages, settlements, faith organisations, businesses, sporting bodies and communities around regular physical activity. By combining accessible daily and weekly activity with mass-participation opportunities, safe and inclusive places to be active, and credible measurement of participation and health outcomes, the programme would aim to create a lasting legacy well beyond the Games.

Programme design

- Use 2027-28 as a co-design and mobilisation year involving Government, schools, workplaces, villages, settlements, faith organisations, sporting bodies, disciplined services, businesses and communities.
- Progressively build an interconnected nationwide participation network around accessible daily and weekly activity and major mass-participation opportunities.
- Work with Australian and Fiji universities and health and physical-activity specialists to establish baseline measures and measurable participation and health outcomes, support behavioural change, and monitor participation, retention, geographic reach and wider health and social impact.
- Ensure activities and places for physical activity are safe, inclusive and accessible to women, girls, older people and people with disabilities.
- Develop a shared funding model so Australian catalytic support progressively leverages Fiji Government, municipal, corporate, sporting, community and participant contributions.

Five-year Australian Government Investment

2027-28	2028-29	2029-30	2030-31	2031-32	5-Year Total
A$100k	A$450k	A$400k	A$650k	A$900k	A$2.50m

Australian Government ask

- Provide A$2.50 million in catalytic and resource funding over five years to establish and scale Active Fiji, supported by clear programme targets and measurable outcomes.

The Outcome:

A sustained increase in physical activity across Fiji, helping combat the country's major NCD challenge while creating a multiplier effect through healthier families, stronger communities, improved wellbeing and a more active and productive population.

4. Cross-cutting partnership priorities

Training partnerships in Fiji

FASANOC proposes that the Partnership actively explore opportunities for Australian teams, National and State Sporting Organisations, clubs and development squads to train in Fiji. This creates genuine reciprocity: Australian sport gains additional training and preparation options while Fiji strengthens athlete services, facility standards and workforce capability.

- Use the Sports Capability Assessment to identify sports and locations where Fiji can realistically offer a quality training environment.
- Develop pilot training and preparation camps with willing Australian partners to test demand, operating requirements and service standards before larger-scale hub development.
- Where gaps are identified, prioritise practical improvements to athlete services, accessibility, equipment, operations and workforce capability rather than unnecessary new infrastructure.

Sports Capability Assessment

A Sports Capability Assessment should be an early Partnership action. It would document Fiji's existing strengths, benchmark those capabilities against relevant international requirements, identify priority gaps and establish the evidence base for international training hubs, competition readiness, sports-tourism development and future targeted investment.

- Benchmark existing training and competition facilities against sport-specific international requirements.
- Assess high-performance services, sports science, medicine, recovery, accommodation, transport and athletesupport capacity.
- Assess accessibility and Para-sport requirements, including classification and adaptive needs.

- Identify facilities suitable for immediate use, facilities requiring targeted improvement, and areas where Fiji should not invest because comparable capability already exists elsewhere.
- Produce a prioritised capability plan to guide Australian and Fiji investment through 2032.

Olympic, Paralympic and inclusive sport development

Inclusion should be embedded across the programme rather than treated as a separate activity. Athlete selection, coaching, technical-official development, facilities, sports science, competition and mobility arrangements should all consider women and girls, Para athletes and people with disabilities.

Sports tourism and Brisbane 2032

Brisbane 2032 creates a significant opportunity to position Fiji as a complementary sporting and tourism hub for teams and visitors travelling to Australia and the wider region. The objective is to embed Fiji into international sporting travel associated with the Games, rather than treating Brisbane 2032 only as an athlete-development opportunity.

Fiji should progressively position itself as a suitable pre-Games training and preparation base for selected international teams, offering appropriate training environments, accommodation, recovery, acclimatisation and a "home away from home" in the years leading to Brisbane 2032. This would build on the Training Partnerships and Sports Capability Assessment work, ensuring that only sports, facilities and locations capable of meeting the required standards are promoted.

The Partnership should also work with tourism, aviation and travel-industry partners to capture a share of the wider visitor flows generated by Brisbane 2032, including:

- pre-Games training and preparation camps for Australian and international teams;
- recovery and post-competition stays where technically appropriate;
- sporting conferences, coaching exchanges and development camps;
- pre- and post-Games travel extensions for athletes, officials, families, supporters and sporting groups; and
- coordinated promotion of Fiji as a natural regional extension to travel associated with Brisbane 2032.

From 2029 onwards, the aim should be to build the sporting, tourism, aviation and travel-industry partnerships needed to convert Brisbane-related movement into additional Fiji visitation, visitor nights and expenditure, while strengthening Fiji's longer-term position as a sports-tourism destination.

Long-term capability and legacy

Every programme component should answer a simple question: what remains in Fiji after the Australian-funded activity ends? The intended

legacy is stronger people, systems and institutions rather than dependence on external delivery.

- FASANOC and National Federations able to plan and manage athlete pathways more professionally.
- More Fiji coaches, officials, practitioners and event personnel with contemporary skills and international experience.
- Better-connected Australian and Fiji institutions with relationships that continue beyond the funding period.
- Facilities and athlete services understood through evidence and improved where this creates genuine value.
- Inclusive pathways and accessibility built into Fiji's sporting system rather than added only for major Games.

5. Reciprocal value of the Partnership

The value of the Partnership extends beyond sporting performance. It creates economic, tourism, health, community, social and institutional benefits for Fiji, while providing Australia with deeper Pacific relationships, professional and commercial opportunities, sporting partnerships and a visible Brisbane 2032 regional legacy. Many of these benefits are shared, strengthening the Vuvale relationship through sustained engagement between people, institutions, communities and businesses in both countries.

Value to Fiji	Value to Australia	Shared value
High-performance access, education and competition	International partnerships for sporting organisations, universities and specialists	Deeper people-to-people and institutional relationships
Coach, technical-official and practitioner development	Professional exchange and regional operating experience	Knowledge transfer and stronger regional sporting networks
International training-hub and major-event capability	Additional training & preparation options for Australian teams, stronger event & institutional partnerships, and opportunities linked to Brisbane 2032 and regional sporting activity	Two-way sporting mobility, sports tourism, major-event partnerships and stronger Fiji–Australia sporting networks
Improved facilities, athlete services and accessibility	Opportunities for Australian expertise, education and professional services	Higher standards & safer, more inclusive sporting environments
Brisbane 2032 opportunities for Fiji athletes and visitors	A visible and measurable Pacific/Oceania legacy from Brisbane 2032	A stronger regional story around the Games
Value to Fiji	**Value to Australia**	**Shared value**

Economic: Visitor spend, procurement, jobs and business activity	Opportunities for Australian services, education and commercial partners	Stronger bilateral economic links through sport
Tourism: More visitor nights, team travel and sports-tourism demand	Fiji as a complementary training and visitor destination	Integrated Fiji–Australia sporting and tourism activity
Health: Increased physical activity and improved wellbeing	Health, university and research collaboration	Shared learning on physical activity and health promotion
Community: Broader participation through schools, workplaces and communities	Stronger community-to-community engagement	Deeper people-to-people connections through sport
Social: Greater inclusion of women, girls, Para athletes and people with disabilities	Practical support for inclusive sports diplomacy	More inclusive sporting systems and opportunities
Long-term capability: Stronger FASANOC, Federations and local sporting systems	Durable institutional partnerships with Fiji	Skills, systems and relationships lasting beyond 2032

6. Governance, selection and implementation

FASANOC proposes one integrated Partnership rather than eight stand-alone projects. Governance should preserve Fiji ownership, provide Australian confidence in selection and expenditure, and keep technical decisions close to the relevant sport.

- Consider the Partnership for inclusion in the Vuvale Union Work Plan and, if both Governments agree, support it through an implementing arrangement setting out scope, governance, funding and accountability.
- Use a joint Fiji-Australia steering mechanism involving relevant Government agencies and FASANOC, while technical delivery remains with appropriate sporting and institutional partners.
- For athlete, coach and technical opportunities, FASANOC and the relevant National Federation jointly identify and endorse Fiji participants against transparent criteria. Australian and Oceania Regional Organisations will work with Fijian counterparts to ensure best fit is maximised.
- Implement the agreed five-year funding commitment through annual workplans, approved budgets, measurable outputs and transparent allocation. Annual deployment would reflect programme readiness, agreed delivery arrangements and performance against the Partnership's accountability framework.
- Maintain safeguarding, welfare, accessibility, financial acquittal and programme-review requirements, with clear transition planning beyond 2032.

7. Climate and sustainable delivery

Climate security is a core Vuvale commitment. The Partnership does not require a separate climate programme, but training hubs, events

and participation activity should use practical resilience, heat, extreme-weather and sustainability standards appropriate to Fiji. Existing facilities should be used efficiently and upgraded where this provides better value than new construction.

8. Overall ask to the Australian Government

- Agree in principle to develop the Fiji-Australia Olympic & Paralympic Partnership from July 2027 to June 2032 as a reciprocal implementing initiative under the Vuvale Union.
- Commence a Sports Capability Assessment to establish the baseline for facilities, high-performance services, accessibility, international training and competition readiness.
- Work with FASANOC and National Federations on transparent identification and endorsement of athletes, coaches and technical personnel for Australian opportunities.
- Develop the Olympic and Paralympic mobility pathway as an early policy priority.
- Mobilise Australian sporting, education, health, university, event and specialist institutions as two-way delivery partners.
- Explore Australian team training and preparation in Fiji and suitable international training-hub opportunities.
- Partner with FASANOC to establish a permanent major-events capability that can identify, attract, secure, coordinate and leverage international sporting events, supported by appropriate Australian institutional relationships, market access, professional exchanges and specialist expertise.
- Use sports tourism and Brisbane 2032 to position Fiji as a complementary regional training and visitor destination, creating reciprocal economic, visitor and institutional opportunities for Fiji and Australia.
- Provide A$22.06 million over five years across the funded components of the Fiji–Australia Olympic & Paralympic Partnership, together with the Olympic and Paralympic mobility policy commitment. Implementation would be progressively delivered through agreed annual workplans, governance arrangements and accountability requirements.
- Design the Partnership around measurable Vuvale commitments and long-term capability retained in Fiji beyond 2032.

END STATE: By June 2032, Fiji should have more internationally competitive athletes, deeper coaching and technical capability, stronger National Federations, better mobility and performance support, improved event and training readiness, more inclusive pathways, and enduring institutional and sporting relationships with Australia. Australia should have a visible Pacific legacy from Brisbane 2032 and stronger sporting, professional and people-to-people connections with Fiji.

FIJI RUGBY

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20th September, 2026

FIJI RAKAVI FOOTBALL UNION LTD.

Written Submission to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence
Fiji–Australia Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty)

Submitted by: Fiji Rakavi Football Union (FRU) Date: 20 September 2026

INTRODUCTION

The FRU appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence regarding the Fiji–Australia Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty).

FRU strongly supports the longstanding relationship between Fiji and Australia and welcomes initiatives that foster deeper cooperation across economic, social, cultural, educational and sporting sectors. FRU also supports the development of all sports in Fiji and recognises the value of wider sporting cooperation that may emerge under the Vuvale framework.

This submission is confined to matters relating to the Veimoana Partnership and seeks to clarify FRU's understanding of its purpose, governance arrangements, program architecture and intended outcomes.

EXECUTIVE POSITION

FRU respectfully submits that the Veimoana Partnership should be recognised as a Rugby Union initiative that was conceived, developed and proposed to advance Rugby Union objectives within Fiji, Samoa, Tonga and Australia.

The evidence contained within the Veimoana Partnership proposal demonstrates that:

1. the Partnership was developed in response to opportunities and challenges facing Rugby Union in the Pacific;
2. the proposed investments are directed towards Rugby Union competitions, pathways, academies and community programs;
3. the governance framework is vested in Rugby Union institutions;
4. the performance indicators are Rugby Union-specific; and

5. the intended beneficiaries are participants, administrators, communities and stakeholders connected to Rugby Union.

FRU further submits that while the Partnership is expected to generate significant social, economic, health and community benefits, those benefits arise through Rugby Union as the chosen delivery platform and should not be interpreted as altering the fundamental nature of the initiative.

THE VEIMOANA PARTNERSHIP

The Veimoana Partnership was developed through collaboration between the Fiji Rugby Union, Samoa Rugby Union, Tonga Rugby Union and Rugby Australia.

The proposal presents a framework for strengthening Pacific Rugby Union through coordinated investment in:

- player pathways;
- high-performance systems;
- youth development;
- women's rugby;
- regional competitions;
- talent retention;
- coaching and officiating development; and
- rugby-led community engagement.

FRU acknowledges and appreciates the support of both the Governments of Fiji and Australia towards initiatives that strengthen Pacific communities and promote regional development.

However, it is important to recognise that the Veimoana Partnership itself was designed around Rugby Union priorities and Rugby Union delivery mechanisms. The proposal consistently defines the initiative as a Rugby Partnership and presents Rugby Union as the primary vehicle for achieving the outcomes proposed.

PROGRAMME DESIGN AND INVESTMENT FRAMEWORK

The clearest indication of the intended purpose of Veimoana is found within the programme architecture itself.

The proposal identifies five core programme pillars:

1. Pacific Rugby Championship (Men's and Women's XVs Rugby);
2. Pacific U18 and U20 Championships;
3. Pacific 7s Championship;
4. National High-Performance Fund and Academies; and
5. Rugby for Resilience Community Development Program.

Each of these pillars is expressly Rugby Union-focused.

The proposed investments are directed toward Rugby Union competitions, Rugby Union participants, Rugby Union pathways, Rugby Union academies, Rugby Union coaching structures and Rugby Union development programs.

Importantly, the proposal does not establish a multi-sport investment framework, nor does it outline program pillars, delivery structures or funding streams for other sporting codes.

The investment model is therefore appropriately characterised as a Rugby Union development framework rather than a general sports development program.

GOVERNANCE AND STEWARDSHIP

The proposal establishes a dedicated Veimoana Partnership Steering Committee comprising representatives of the national rugby unions of Fiji, Samoa, Tonga and Australia together with Oceania Rugby.

The proposed governance arrangements assign responsibility for:

- strategic direction;
- programme prioritisation;
- performance oversight;
- accountability mechanisms;
- reporting obligations; and • programme stewardship

to Rugby Union institutions.

In FRU's view, governance arrangements are among the strongest indicators of the intended purpose of any programme.

Had the initiative been conceived as a broader multi-sport platform, governance arrangements would reasonably be expected to reflect broader sporting representation. Instead, the proposed governance framework is entirely rugbycentred because the Partnership itself was developed to advance Rugby Union outcomes.

FRU therefore respectfully submits that any consideration of material amendments to the purpose, scope, governance arrangements, funding framework, programme pillars or intended beneficiaries of the Partnership should involve consultation with the founding partners that developed and continue to steward the initiative.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC MULTIPLIER EFFECT

FRU recognises that the significance of the Veimoana Partnership extends beyond sporting performance.

The proposal identifies Rugby Union as a major cultural institution throughout Fiji, Samoa and Tonga and highlights its role in national identity, social cohesion, youth engagement, regional diplomacy and community wellbeing.

The Partnership is expected to generate broad public benefits through several pathways.



Youth Development and Employment

The proposal establishes structured pathways from grassroots and school rugby through to elite competition and international representation.

These pathways support leadership development, personal growth, confidence building and employability while creating long-term opportunities for Pacific youth.

Health and Wellbeing

The proposal identifies Rugby Union as a vehicle for improving health outcomes through increased physical activity, healthier lifestyles and stronger community engagement.

Women's Participation and Empowerment

Women and girls are identified as priority beneficiaries through dedicated competitions, development pathways and participation programs designed to increase representation and opportunity at all levels of the game.

Economic Impact

Regional competitions, academies, events and player development systems have the capacity to generate economic activity through employment, tourism, event hosting, commercial partnerships and local business participation.

Community Resilience and Social Cohesion

The Rugby for Resilience programme seeks to utilise rugby's unique reach and influence to support outcomes in health, education, inclusion, gender equality and community development.

FRU respectfully submits that these broader public benefits are among the strongest reasons for investment in the Partnership. However, they arise because Rugby Union serves as the delivery platform. They do not alter the underlying character of Veimoana as a Rugby Union initiative.

FRU POSITION REGARDING SCOPE AND APPLICATION

FRU supports broader sporting cooperation and welcomes future initiatives that may benefit a range of sporting codes and communities under the Vuvale framework.

However, FRU respectfully submits that broader sporting cooperation and the Veimoana Partnership are distinct policy concepts.

The existence of wider developmental benefits does not transform the Veimoana Partnership into a multi-sport development programme.

Rather, the proposal demonstrates that:

- Rugby Union is the primary delivery mechanism;
- Rugby Union is the primary beneficiary;
- Rugby Union institutions are responsible for governance; and • Rugby Union outcomes are the intended measures of success.

Accordingly, FRU respectfully submits that the Veimoana Partnership should continue to be recognised and assessed according to its original programme design, governance framework and intended outcomes.

GOVERNANCE SAFEGUARDS AND RESERVATIONS

In the interests of transparency, accountability and sound governance, FRU respectfully records the following observations:

8.1 Recognition of Original Purpose

The Veimoana Partnership was developed and proposed as a Rugby Union initiative and should be considered within that context.

8.2 Preservation of Programme Integrity

FRU respectfully submits that any interpretation of the proposal should remain consistent with its stated objectives, programme design, governance arrangements and performance measures.

8.3 Consultation on Material Amendments

Any proposal to materially expand, reallocate, repurpose, redefine or otherwise alter program objectives; funding priorities; governance arrangements; program pillars; or intended beneficiaries should be undertaken following appropriate consultation with the founding partners who participated in the design and development of the initiative.

8.4 No Restriction on Separate Multi-Sport Initiatives

Nothing in this submission should be interpreted as opposition to broader sports development or as limiting the ability of Government to establish separate multisport programmes, funding mechanisms or cooperative arrangements under the Vuvale Union framework.

FRU's position is simply that any such initiatives should be developed through their own governance, consultation and implementation structures and should not be presumed to arise from, or automatically modify, the purpose and design of the Veimoana Partnership.

Reservation of Stakeholder Position

FRU reserves its position on any future proposal that would materially alter the Partnership's scope, governance arrangements, funding priorities, accountability framework or intended beneficiaries until such proposal has been formally presented and appropriately considered by the relevant founding partners. This was confirmed and discussed between FRU and DFAT officials in Canberra on 24th August 2026.

STRATEGIC CASE FOR RUGBY UNION INVESTMENT AND THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE VEIMOANA PARTNERSHIP

9.1 Talent is not the problem — capacity and systems are

For Fiji Rugby, there is an important distinction that should inform national sports policy.

Fiji does not have a talent problem. We have a capacity and systems problem.

Fiji has consistently demonstrated an extraordinary ability to produce athletes capable of competing at the highest levels of international sport despite the country's small population and limited domestic resources. Rugby provides one of the clearest examples of this.

The strategic question is therefore not simply how Fiji can identify more talent. The more important question is:

What could Fiji achieve if serious, sustained and coordinated investment were placed behind the talent that already exists?

World Rugby has recognised the structural gap between domestic competition and international professional rugby in the Pacific and has supported initiatives designed to strengthen professional pathways and high-performance environments. The development of the Fijian Drua provides a particularly relevant example. The establishment of a professional Fijian franchise created an additional pathway through which Fijian players could remain connected to Fiji while accessing a professional environment and high-level competition. World Rugby identified the development of professional pathways as an important means of addressing the gap between domestic rugby and international performance. The lesson for national sports policy is clear:

Talent alone does not produce sustained high performance. Talent requires an ecosystem.

That ecosystem includes appropriate facilities, coaching, sports science, sports medicine, strength and conditioning, competition, athlete welfare, education, administration, governance and commercial sustainability. For Fiji to convert its exceptional natural talent into sustained international performance, these systems must be developed as national capability rather than left predominantly to individual sporting organisations, international federations, donors and sponsors.

9.2 Fiji Rugby as a national development platform

Fiji Rugby provides an important case study of what can be achieved when sport becomes more than competition.

The organisation's role increasingly extends beyond the delivery of national teams and competitions. Rugby provides pathways for young people, develops coaches and officials, creates international relationships, contributes to community engagement, supports women's participation and provides a platform through which Fiji is represented internationally.

The Fiji Rugby Union's 2024 financial reporting illustrates the scale of this ecosystem. The Union recorded gross income of approximately FJD $29.7 million for the year ended 31 December 2024, with income primarily driven by corporate sponsorship, Government support and World Rugby grants. The Union also reported continued support through multi-year sponsorship arrangements and assistance from World Rugby and the Fijian Government.

These figures are important not simply as measures of the size of Fiji Rugby as an organisation, but as an indication of the network of commercial, governmental and international relationships that rugby has built around Fiji.

There is consequently a legitimate national policy question:

How can Government strengthen and leverage an ecosystem that has already demonstrated its ability to attract international investment, generate economic activity and create opportunities for Fijians?

9.3 Rugby's economic and tourism contribution

The contribution of Rugby Union extends well beyond the balance sheet of the national sporting organisation.

A 2014 study and subsequent analysis of sports-generated economic activity identified the significant contribution made by professional sports participation and international sporting grants to Fiji's foreign exchange earnings. Available estimates indicated approximately FJD $18.4 million in sports-generated remittances in 2014, together with approximately FJD $10.3 million in international sports grants, representing at least FJD $28.7 million flowing into Fiji's foreign reserves through these identifiable channels. These figures did not capture all funds brought home or transferred outside formal banking channels.

Rugby is a significant component of this wider sporting economy. Research has also documented the scale of Fijian rugby migration and the economic and sociocultural importance of professional rugby contracts overseas.

More recently, the economic value of rugby as a tourism platform has become increasingly measurable. A 2023 economic evaluation of Super Rugby matches hosted in Fiji estimated approximately FJD $67.1 million in direct expenditure associated with spectators and event operations. The study further estimated that the games generated approximately 40,328 overseas visitor nights that would not otherwise have occurred, with 84 percent of visitor spectators indicating that they either travelled to Fiji for the games or extended their stay as a result of attending.

The 2026 Coral Coast Fiji 7s provides another contemporary example. Organisers reported an economic and media impact of approximately FJD $18 million, including tourism expenditure and earned media value, with benefits extending to hotels, transport providers, restaurants, local vendors and surrounding communities. The event also reported significant international digital reach and continued growth as a sports-tourism and international rugby platform.

These examples demonstrate that Rugby Union can generate value across a much wider economic ecosystem, including:

- accommodation and hospitality;
- aviation and transport;
- restaurants and tourism operators;
- local vendors and communities;
- employment and casual work;
- events and entertainment;
- international media exposure;
- commercial sponsorship;
- sports tourism;
- player development and overseas employment; and • Fiji's international brand and reputation.

Accordingly, investment in Rugby Union should not be considered solely an investment in sport. It can also be an investment in tourism, employment, youth development, international relations, community development and national identity.

9.4 Rugby has earned confidence from international partners

Another important consideration is the level of confidence that international sporting organisations, governments, donors and commercial partners have demonstrated in Fiji Rugby Union as a delivery platform.

Australia has already used rugby as a vehicle for people-to-people relationships, women's empowerment, elite pathways and regional cooperation. Australia's Pacific rugby investments have supported professional pathways, women's rugby, academies, regional competitions and broader rugby development.

World Rugby has likewise invested significantly in Pacific high-performance pathways, competitions, governance and development. Its **Impact Beyond Pasifika** initiative has been structured around areas including high-performance development, governance and financial sustainability, community rugby development and regional engagement.

These investments are significant because they demonstrate that international partners increasingly see Fiji Rugby not simply as a sporting organisation, but as an effective platform through which broader development outcomes can be achieved.

The confidence of international partners is also reflected in the willingness of commercial sponsors and development organisations to support FRU programs over multiple years. FRU therefore submits that this external confidence should not be viewed simply as a source of funding. It should be viewed as an asset that Fiji can leverage through stronger domestic investment and infrastructure**.**

9.5 Government investment should strengthen, not duplicate, what national sporting organisations have built

FRU respectfully recognises and appreciates the role of Government in supporting sport in Fiji and acknowledges the Government's contribution to national sporting organisations. At the same time, there is an opportunity to consider whether the current investment model adequately reflects the contribution that national sporting organisations make to Fiji's wider social and economic objectives. National sporting organisations are increasingly being asked to deliver outcomes across youth development, health, education, gender inclusion, community engagement, international representation, tourism, employment and economic development — responsibilities that extend considerably beyond the traditional concept of sport.

Where national sporting organisations have demonstrated the ability to attract international funding, private-sector sponsorship and technical assistance, Government has an opportunity to provide the domestic infrastructure and institutional platform that allows these resources to achieve greater and more sustainable impact. In this context, the ministry's role should not be to duplicate or compete with the work of established sporting organisations.

Rather, it can:

- provide strategic national infrastructure;
- co-invest in high-performance capability;
- strengthen sports science and sports medicine;
- facilitate access to land and facilities;

- support research and education;
- create enabling policy and fiscal settings;
- coordinate across ministries;
- leverage foreign assistance;
- support commercially sustainable sporting assets; and
- establish the national platforms through which Fiji's sporting organisations can deliver at international standards.

This would represent a more strategic partnership between Government and national sporting organisations.

9.7 Why the Veimoana Partnership should remain distinct

It is within this wider context that FRU respectfully submits that the **Veimoana Partnership should remain distinct from broader multi-sport initiatives that may be developed by the Ministry or Government under the wider Vuvale framework.**

FRU fully supports the development of other sports and recognises that Government has a legitimate responsibility to provide opportunities across Fiji's sporting sector. However, the existence of wider social, economic, tourism and development benefits does not change the fundamental character of Veimoana. The Partnership was conceived, developed and structured around Rugby Union. Its programme pillars are Rugby Union-specific; its governance arrangements are Rugby Union-led; its performance indicators relate to Rugby Union outcomes; and its principal delivery institutions are the participating Rugby Unions and Oceania Rugby.

The broader benefits — youth development, women's participation, employment, community resilience, tourism, international relationships and social cohesion — are multiplier effects arising from the Rugby Union investment platform**.** They are not evidence that the Partnership should consequently become a general multisport programme. FRU therefore respectfully submits that there should be a clear distinction between:

(a) Government's broader responsibility for the development of sport in Fiji; and

(b) the specific Rugby Union investment represented by the Veimoana Partnership.

Both can and should exist. Indeed, a clear distinction may allow Government to develop separate and appropriately governed multi-sport initiatives while protecting the integrity, accountability and intended outcomes of Veimoana.

9.8 A partnership model for the future

FRU believes the strongest approach is therefore one of partnership rather than competition between Government and national sporting organisations.

- Government can provide the policy environment, infrastructure and strategic investment.
- National sporting organisations can provide the technical expertise, established pathways, athletes, coaches, competitions, community networks and delivery capability.

- International sporting organisations and development partners can provide technical assistance, international networks and development resources.
- Universities and research institutions can provide evidence, sports science and innovation.
- The private sector can provide sponsorship, investment, commercial expertise and market access.
- The opportunity presented by Veimoana is to bring these capabilities together around a clearly defined Rugby Union development framework.

In doing so, Fiji would not merely be investing in rugby teams or competitions. It would be investing in a platform that can contribute to human capital, youth development, employment, tourism, community resilience, international engagement and national identity**.**

FRU respectfully submits that the strength of the Veimoana Partnership lies precisely in its specificity. Rugby Union has demonstrated its capacity to attract international partners, mobilise commercial support, create professional pathways, generate tourism activity and deliver community outcomes. The appropriate policy response is therefore not to dilute that platform because it produces benefits beyond rugby. The appropriate response is to recognise, strengthen and leverage the platform while ensuring that the benefits are measured and shared through appropriate national development mechanisms.

FRU is committed to working constructively with the Government of Fiji and the Ministry of Youth and Sports to ensure that Rugby Union continues to contribute to Fiji's national development objectives. At the same time, FRU respectfully maintains that the Veimoana Partnership should be protected as the Rugby Union initiative it was designed to be, with its original governance, programme architecture, funding purpose and intended outcomes maintained.

Fiji does not have a shortage of sporting talent. The national opportunity is to build the systems, infrastructure and investment environment that allows that talent to reach its full potential.

CONCLUSION

FRU remains a strong supporter of the Fiji–Australia relationship and of the aspirations that underpin the Fiji–Australia Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance.

FRU respectfully submits that the Veimoana Partnership is properly understood as a Rugby Union initiative whose program architecture, governance arrangements, funding framework and performance measures are explicitly directed toward Rugby Union development. While the Partnership is expected to generate significant social, economic, health and community benefits across Fiji, Samoa, Tonga and Australia, those outcomes are most accurately characterised as multiplier effects arising from investment in Rugby Union rather than evidence of a broader multisport funding programme.

Accordingly, FRU respectfully requests that the Committee:

1. Recognise the Rugby Union-specific purpose and origins of the Veimoana Partnership;
2. Acknowledge the governance and stewardship arrangements established by the participating rugby organisations;
3. Note that the program design, funding framework and performance measures are directed toward Rugby Union outcomes;

4. Recognise the substantial socio-economic and community benefits expected to arise through Rugby Union investment;

5. Support the principle that any material modification to the Partnership's objectives, governance framework, program design, funding priorities or intended beneficiaries should be subject to appropriate consultation with the founding partners; and

6. Ensure that future consideration of the Partnership within the Vuvale framework respects the purpose, governance arrangements and stakeholder commitments upon which the initiative was established.

The Fiji Rakavi Football Union thanks the Committee for the opportunity to provide this submission and remains available to provide any further information that may assist its deliberations.

Respectfully,



Koli Sewabu
Chief Executive Officer
Fiji Rakavi Football Union Ltd.



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RUGBY
PARTNERSHIP

FIJI | TONGA | SAMOA | AUSTRALIA



Rugby is more than just a game f
our roots, our families, and our c
identity, and giving back to the la

Henry Taefu
Former Manu Samoa player



Contents



Welcome

Rugby is central to Pacific life, carrying pride, connection, and the strength of our nations. The Veimoana Rugby Partnership builds on this foundation, supporting grassroots participation and elite pathways so the game continues to inspire, unite, and uplift communities across the region.

02

Joint Statement

Joint Statement

Joint Statement from the Prime Ministers of Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga. In support of the Veimoana Rugby Partnership Proposal.

As the Prime Ministers of Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga, we in our commitment to the future of rugby union in our region and express our full support for the Veimoana Rugby Partnership.

Rugby Union is our national sport - played and cherished for over a century, it is deeply woven into the cultural fabric of our societies. It represents pride, identity, resilience, and unity.

From packed village fields to global stadiums, it is through rugby that our people express themselves to the world. Our teams are instantly recognisable and respected, not just for their talent, but for the heart, humility, and pride with which they play.

At home, rugby is more than a sport, it is a tool for social cohesion, a pathway for our youth, and a source of national pride. It connects generations and builds bridges between our peoples.

Now, as the Pacific prepares to host two Rugby World Cups and the Olympic Rugby 7s, we are entering a transformative era. These historic milestones present an unmatched opportunity, but also underscore the urgent need for sustained investment in the game that defines us.

Rising operational costs, limited resources, and increased investment in emerging sports, many of which do not hold the same cultural meaning or community connection, pose a real threat to the future of rugby in the Pacific.

The Veimoana Rugby Partnership offers a bold, timely, and collaborative solution. It presents a shared vision to develop our rugby infrastructure, deepen people-to-people links with Australia, and elevate our teams through sustainable pathways for both women and men.

To realise this vision, we are seeking a funding of AUD 30 million per year for a period of five years.

This investment will allow us to:

+ Build and sustain domestic high-performance systems;
+ Develop regional competitions and talent academies;
+ Provide equal opportunities for women and girls;
+ Use rugby as a platform to deliver social development outcomes across our nations.

We see this not as a cost, but as an investment in one of the Pacific's greatest success stories, and a commitment to preserving the cultural heartbeat of our region.

Let us protect what matters, invest in what works, and ensure that rugby continues to inspire, unite, and uplift our people for generations to come.

The Honourable Siaosi Sovaleni

Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Tonga



Prime Minister of the Independent State of Samoa



The Honourable Sitiveni Rabuka

Prime Minister of the Republic of Fiji



Rugby has given us a platform to showcase our strength and resilience. It’s about breaking barriers and showing the world that Pacific women are forces to be reckoned with.

Cynthia Ta’ala
Former Captain
Samoa National Women’s Team
(Manusina)



03

Why this matters now

Why this matters now

A decisive moment

The Pacific is entering a defining decade for rugby. Over the coming years our nations will compete on the world stage at the 2027 and 2029 Rugby World Cups and on home soil at the Brisbane 2032 Olympic Games.

> These milestones present a rare opportunity to inspire participation, strengthen elite pathways and elevate the profile of Pacific rugby internationally.

They offer the chance to convert global attention into enduring gains for the sport and its communities.

Challenges to the game

This opportunity comes at a time of mounting pressures. Operational costs are increasing, resources are stretched, and other sports are expanding into the region with substantial financial support and structured recruitment programs.

Without targeted investment, domestic competitions, player development pathways and community programs risk losing momentum. For nations where rugby has long been the leading sport, this competition challenges both performance and cultural standing.

Cultural significance

Rugby union is deeply embedded in the identity of the Pacific. It is the national game, played and followed in every community. From village fields to international arenas, it connects generations, inspires young people and unites nations. It is also a bridge to Australia, built through decades of shared heroes, rivalries and unforgettable matches.

> Sustaining and advancing rugby means safeguarding a cultural asset that delivers social, economic and diplomatic value

A coordinated response

The Veimoana Rugby Partnership is designed to meet this moment. It brings together Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Rugby Australia and Oceania Rugby in a long-term plan to invest in high-performance systems, expand regional competitions, and create opportunities for women and men.

This coordinated approach will ensure the Pacific builds on the global attention ahead, securing rugby's place at the heart of Pacific life for generations to come.

Registered Club Players.
A snapshot of a much larger game.

46 million
active participants

57%
of all players are pre-teens
24% are female

11%
increase global in participation


5,938
PLAYERS


27,283
PLAYERS


113,650
PLAYERS

65%
increase in womens rugby fan engagement

30%
increase in new rugby clubs

38%
increase in adult female players

With more active lifestyle rugbyplayers have better health outcomes than the general population over their lifetime.

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25%
BREAST CANCER RISK REDUCTION IN WOMEN

30%
OBESITY RISK REDUCTION IN CHILDREN

15%
HEART DISEASE RISK REDUCTION

33%
MENTAL ILLNESS RISK REDUCTION



Rugby has strong intrinsic values

Supportingindividual personal development increasing confidence and greater employment prospects

VEIMOANA RUGBY PARTNERSHIP



PacificAus Sports' support for Penina Pasifika will inspire girls back home to start their own rugby journey. It is an investment back into our people and our potential. We are so grateful for this opportunity.

Shonté To'a, Penina Pasifika players (Tonga)



04

A framework for Pacific Rugby's future

A framework for Pacific Rugby's future

The Veimoana Rugby Partnership will strengthen the foundations of Pacific Rugby Union by uniting communities across the region.

Delivered in partnership with Rugby Australia this five-year initiative will provide structured, strategic investment to enhance player pathways, competition platforms, and domestic infrastructure.

At the heart of this partnership are five program pillars - a suite of competitions, academies, and community programs designed to create opportunity, develop talent, and harness rugby's cultural power for broader social impact. These pillars are articulated in the following pages.

By creating new opportunities for women and men to play, train, and thrive, the partnership will provide a pathway for Samoa and Tonga to join Fiji in high-performance regional club competitions. Rugby's deep roots and unifying force will also drive community development and positive outcomes across the Pacific.

LAKAPI SAMOA

FIJI RUGBY



05

Program Pillars

Program Overview Pillars

1

Pacific Rugby Championship

XV Rugby
Men & Women

2

Pacific U18 & U20 Championships

3

Pacific 7s Championship

Sevens Rugby
Men & Women

4

National High-Performance Fund

5

Rugby for Resilience: Community Development Program

Program Pillars

1 Pacific Rugby Championship

XV Rugby - **Men & Women**

Participating Nations:
Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Australia

Timeline:
September-November

Format:
Double-header fixtures hosted in Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, and Australia

This flagship regional competition will serve as the premier Tier-2 XVs championship for the Pacific. It provides a professional platform for Samoa and Tonga to build on-island teams, develop and retain local talent, and strengthen elite domestic structures. Hosting fixtures across the four nations also ensures visibility, commercial reach, and a direct connection with rugby communities.



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Program
Pillars

2 Pacific U18 & U20 Championships

Participating Nations:
Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Australia

Timeline:
October-November

Format:
Centralised tournament, rotating host country annually
Match schedule: Three matches per team across ten days

This structured youth tournament creates a formal pathway from school rugby to elite international levels. It supports early talent identification and development, while ensuring players transition into senior national programs. It also provides valuable exposure to international competition in a developmentally supportive environment.



Program
Pillars

3

Pacific 7s Championship

Sevens Rugby- **Men & Women**

Participating Nations:
Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Australia, New Zealand

Timeline:
Annually - Three Two-Day Tournaments

Venues:
Integrated into marquee Pacific events such as Coral Coast 7s (Fiji) and Teuila 7s (Samoa)

A revitalised regional Sevens circuit that leverages iconic local tournaments to prepare teams for the global stage. The circuit will develop squad depth, provide regular international exposure, and build commercial visibility for Pacific Sevens. By integrating with existing community tournaments, it also strengthens the link between grassroots passion and elite performance.



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PARTNERSHIP

Program
Pillars



4 National High-Performance Fund and Academies

Location:
Fiji, Samoa, Tonga

Integrated academies in each country will give athletes access to professional coaching, conditioning, education, and off-field development. These academies will connect domestic competitions to international pathways, ensuring players are supported both on and off the field.

Over time, they will produce stronger national teams while fostering career and leadership development for Pacific athletes.



Program
Pillars

5 Rugby for Resilience: Community Development Program



Location:
Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, and the wider Pacific region

Delivered with Oceania Rugby, NGOs, and government partners, this program will harness rugby's cultural reach to support health, education, gender equality, and inclusion. It will use the sport's unique social role to build stronger, more resilient communities, demonstrating rugby's value beyond the playing field.



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Within two years of engagement in the Super Rugby competitions, we have seen the return of your (Australia's) investment, supporting the lives of our families and communities. Our young people now have the opportunity to dare to dream about a life that sports can offer them.

Prime Minister of the Republic of Fiji
Sitiveni Rabuka



06

Implementation and Investment Framework

Implementation and

The Veimoana Rugby Partnership Steering Committee, comprising representatives from the national rugby unions of Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, and Australia and Oceania Rugby, will provide governance for the partnership

Governance and delivery structure

The Veimoana Rugby Partnership Steering Committee, comprising representatives from the national rugby unions of Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, and Australia, will provide governance for the partnership.

Rugby Australia, already leading the delivery of Australia's PacificAus Sports rugby investments, will leverage this expertise to partner with Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga in supporting strategic direction, financial accountability, and reporting against agreed outcomes, aligned with Australia's Sports Diplomacy 2032+ objectives.

Simultaneously, the Veimoana Steering Committee will set priorities, provide expert input, and guide program decisions, ensuring the partnership reflects shared regional ambitions and local context.

It is suggested that day-to-day delivery be implemented through the existing DFAT-Rugby Australia partnership, with hands-on support and leadership from the unions of Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga, to ensure programs complement existing Australian investments while remaining locally driven, culturally grounded, and responsive.

Funding model

We are seeking an investment of AUD 30 million per year for five years. This funding will be allocated across the five program pillars, ensuring both high-performance outcomes and community development.

A clear reporting framework will guarantee transparency, track progress against agreed objectives, and demonstrate value for money.

This investment will allow us

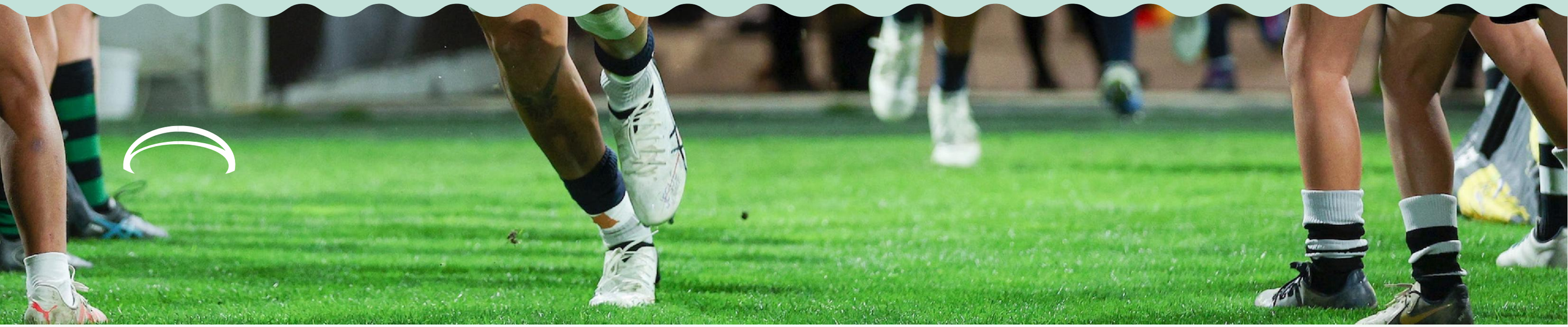
Success will be measured through a mix of performance and participation indicators, including:

+ Establishment of sustainable on-island high-performance systems in Samoa and Tonga.
+ Participation and competitive performance in regional XVs and Sevens competitions.
+ Youth engagement through structured U18 and U20 tournaments.
+ Increased representation of women and girls at all levels of rugby.
+ Documented community impact in health, education, and inclusion.
+ Strengthened people-to-people ties between the Pacific and Australia.

Investment Framework

Rugby is about honouring our ancestors and carrying the flag for our people. When we step onto that field, we represent more than just ourselves; we represent our families, our cultures, and our nations.

Ardie Savea
Captain of Moana Pasifika



07

Call to Action

Call to Action

Rugby is more than competition, it is a platform for connection, resilience and diplomacy.

Supporting the Veimoana Partnership will deliver outcomes that extend beyond sport: stronger youth pathways, healthier communities, and deeper bonds between nations.

This investment will secure rugby's place at the heart of Pacific life for generations to come.



Thank You



VEIMOANA
RUGBY
PARTNERSHIP

FIJI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

SUBMISSION TO THE

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON TREATIES

Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union

2 October 2026

Submitted by
Fiji Football Association

Building football capability in Fiji through skills transfer, technical development and sustainable pathways

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Fiji Football Association (Fiji FA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry into the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union.

For Fiji FA, the priority is straightforward: we want to develop more qualified football people here in Fiji. We need more local coaches, coach educators, referees, physiotherapists, sportsscience personnel, analysts, administrators and other specialists with the skills to deliver football at a higher standard.

We therefore propose a multi-year Fiji-Australia Football Capacity and Professional

Development Partnership. Its main purpose would be to bring appropriate expertise into Fiji, work alongside Fijian personnel and build skills that remain in the country.

This approach fits the Vuvale Union's focus on prosperity, resilience, people-to-people connections, inclusive development and mobility. Article 7 also provides a practical avenue through the Vuvale Union Work Plan for long-term implementation.

Our preference is to train Fijians who can then train others. If we develop our own coach educators, referee instructors and technical specialists, the benefit can be taken into districts and clubs throughout Fiji rather than ending when an overseas expert leaves.

Bula FC also gives Fiji football something it has not previously had: a professional football environment at home. It can be used as a practical learning environment for Fijian coaches, medical and high-performance staff, analysts, administrators, media personnel and commercial staff. The knowledge developed there can then strengthen the wider football system.

WHAT FIJI FA IS ASKING FOR

- A structured, multi-year football development partnership focused on capability in Fiji.
- Australian technical specialists and institutions working with Fijian counterparts in Fiji.
- Train-the-trainer programmes that develop Fijian educators, instructors and mentors.
- Targeted investment in everyday training and high-performance infrastructure.
- Development pathways for youth, women and girls alongside technical workforce development.
- Strategic placements in Australia where they fill a specific skills gap and require knowledge transfer on return.
- Football to be considered in relevant implementation planning under the Vuvale Union Work Plan.

1. WHY THIS MATTERS FOR FIJI FOOTBALL

Fiji has talented footballers. But developing players alone is not enough. If we want those players to progress to professional and international football, we must also develop the Fijian coaches, referees, physiotherapists, analysts, sports-science personnel and administrators around them.

Fiji FA operates across a geographically dispersed island nation. Bringing specialist expertise into Fiji allows more people to benefit from each programme and makes it easier for knowledge to be transferred through our district football structures.

International exposure remains important, but it should support development at home. Where Fijian personnel undertake placements overseas, the purpose should be clear: learn, return, share and apply.

2. ALIGNMENT WITH THE VUVALE UNION

Article 2 of the Vuvale Union provides for stronger prosperity and resilience and enhanced cultural and people connections between Fiji and Australia. Article 3 addresses inclusive development, economic and human development, people linkages and mobility.

Article 7 establishes the Vuvale Bukmak and requires a Vuvale Union Work Plan for phased longterm implementation. Fiji FA sees this as an appropriate mechanism through which practical sportsdevelopment initiatives could be considered.

The Written Analysis also refers to capacity building, capability improvement and technical assistance as areas for implementation resourcing and identifies sport as part of building unity between Fiji and Australia.

Fiji FA's proposal is therefore not simply for football funding. It is for a practical skills and institutional-development partnership that uses football to build Fijian capability.

3. A FIJI-AUSTRALIA FOOTBALL CAPACITY AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIP

We propose five connected areas of cooperation. They are intended to work together rather than as separate projects.

PILLAR 1: TECHNICAL, COACHING AND MATCH-OFFICIAL DEVELOPMENT

The first priority is developing the people who teach, lead and officiate the game.

- Coach development from grassroots through youth, women's, senior and elite football.
- Fijian coach educators who can progressively deliver more coach education locally.
- Goalkeeper and specialist coaching.
- Technical directors and development officers.
- Talent identification and player-development methodology.
- Referee education, fitness and technical development.
- Fijian referee instructors and assessors.

Our preference is a train-the-trainer model. Australian specialists could work alongside selected Fijian personnel over time, with those Fijians then responsible for training and mentoring others. That gives each programme a life beyond the initial delivery.

PILLAR 2: HIGH PERFORMANCE, SPORTS SCIENCE AND TRAINING INFRASTRUCTURE

Fiji also needs a stronger local high-performance workforce. Priority areas include strength and conditioning, physiotherapy, sports medicine, nutrition, performance analysis, rehabilitation, injury prevention, player wellbeing and appropriate performance technology.

Infrastructure support should focus first on facilities that are used every day, rather than assuming development assistance must mean major stadium construction.

- Quality training pitches and lighting.
- Gym and strength-and-conditioning spaces.
- Medical and rehabilitation areas.
- Training, analysis and performance equipment.
- Regional training environments that allow programmes to reach people outside the main centres.

Any infrastructure investment should be linked to trained personnel, active programmes, maintenance and measurable use.

PILLAR 3: YOUTH, WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' PATHWAYS

Fiji needs a clearer pathway from schools and grassroots football into academies, district football, national youth teams and professional football. That requires qualified youth coaches, stronger talent identification, appropriate academy standards and more quality competition.

Women's and girls' football should be built into the partnership from the beginning. Development should include players, but also female coaches, referees, administrators and technical leaders. A stronger women's game requires a stronger technical workforce around it.

PILLAR 4: FOOTBALL ADMINISTRATION, PROFESSIONALISATION AND COMMERCIAL SKILLS

Better football also depends on better-run football organisations. Fiji FA would welcome capacity development in:

- competition and club administration;
- governance, finance, procurement, legal and HR systems;
- safeguarding, integrity and player welfare;
- communications, media and broadcast production;
- sponsorship and commercial partnerships;
- ticketing, CRM, merchandising, digital systems and brand development.

Commercial capability is important because stronger local revenue helps clubs and football organisations become more sustainable and less dependent on grants.

PILLAR 5: AUSTRALIA-FIJI KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE AND PROFESSIONAL PLACEMENTS

Targeted placements in Australia can be valuable where they address a real skills gap. These could include coaches, referees, physiotherapists, sports scientists, analysts, administrators and commercial staff.

However, the placement itself should not be the result. Participants should return with a clear role in sharing what they learned, mentoring colleagues or contributing to local programme delivery.

Likewise, visiting Australian specialists should work alongside local staff rather than simply deliver one-off workshops.

4. BULA FC AS A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The establishment of Bula FC has created a professional football environment in Fiji. This gives us an opportunity not only to develop professional players, but also to develop Fijian coaches, medical and high-performance staff, analysts, administrators and commercial personnel in a professional setting.

Bula FC can therefore be used as one practical learning environment within the wider Fiji football system. Australian expertise could support mentoring, sports science and medicine, performance analysis, professional club operations, commercial development and other areas where local capability needs to grow.

The value is wider than the club. Where appropriate, knowledge and systems developed in the professional environment can be transferred into Fiji FA's national teams, domestic competitions, districts and clubs.

Australia's support for the Fijian Drua provides a relevant example of sport being used to deepen bilateral links and support elite sporting pathways. Fiji FA is asking that football also be considered, using a model suited to football and focused on building capability in Fiji.

5. DEVELOPMENT BEYOND THE ELITE GAME

The benefits must reach beyond Fiji FA headquarters, national teams and Bula FC.

Fijian personnel who receive advanced education or mentoring should be supported to conduct regional workshops, mentor district personnel and contribute to national development programmes. This is how a relatively small investment in specialist expertise can reach a much larger part of the football community.

Over time, success should mean that Fiji has more of its own people capable of delivering highquality football education, medical and high-performance services, officiating, administration and professional operations.

6. COMPLEMENTING FIFA AND OFC DEVELOPMENT

Fiji FA already works within FIFA and OFC development structures. Any Australian support should complement that investment rather than duplicate it. FIFA's development approach combines project investment with technical expertise, education, capacity development and knowledge sharing. FIFA's club-licensing and women's football programmes similarly recognise that sustainable development requires capable people and strong systems as well as funding. An Australia-Fiji partnership could therefore focus on identified gaps where Australian expertise, institutions and professional environments can add practical value.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Establish a multi-year Football Capacity and Professional Development Partnership.** The principal objective should be to build skills, people and systems within Fiji.
- **Prioritise in-country technical development.** Bring appropriate expertise into Fiji so more Fijian coaches, referees, medical and high-performance staff, administrators and other specialists can benefit.
- **Use train-the-trainer models.** Develop Fijian educators, instructors and mentors who can then take programmes into districts and clubs.
- **Invest in the full football pathway.** Combine technical development with youth, women's and girls' football, high performance, administration, professionalisation and practical training infrastructure.
- **Use Bula FC as a professional learning environment.** Link relevant support to the development of Fijian professional expertise and wider knowledge transfer.
- **Use Australian placements strategically.** Support targeted exchanges where they address a defined capability gap and include a plan for knowledge transfer on return.
- **Coordinate with existing FIFA and OFC programmes.** Use Australian support to fill identified gaps and add specialist expertise rather than duplicate existing programmes.
- **Include football in relevant Vuvale Union implementation planning.** Consult Fiji FA when sports-related initiatives under the Work Plan are being developed.

8. HOW WE WOULD MEASURE SUCCESS

We suggest measuring what remains in Fiji, not simply how many activities were funded.

- More qualified Fijian coaches, referees, technical staff, medical personnel and administrators.
- More Fijian educators and instructors delivering programmes to others.
- Greater local capability in sports science, medicine, analysis and high performance.
- More women progressing as coaches, referees, administrators and technical leaders.
- Stronger youth pathways and better access to quality coaching and competition.
- Knowledge reaching districts, clubs, academies, schools and grassroots programmes.

- Improved professional, governance and commercial systems.
- Less reliance on external expertise as local capability grows.

CONCLUSION

For a developing football nation such as Fiji, the most valuable assistance is not simply additional funding. It is investment in people, knowledge, infrastructure and systems that can be sustained locally.

Fiji FA wants to develop more of its own coaches, coach educators, referees, technical specialists, medical and high-performance personnel, administrators and commercial professionals. We want those people to be able to train and mentor the next group.

A Fiji-Australia Football Capacity and Professional Development Partnership would give us a practical way to do this. It could combine in-country technical education, high-performance development, youth and women's pathways, institutional strengthening and targeted knowledge exchange.

Bula FC can contribute as a professional learning environment, but the wider beneficiary should be Fiji football - from grassroots and districts through to national teams and the professional game.

Fiji FA respectfully asks that football development be considered within implementation of the Vuvale Union and that Fiji FA be engaged in developing a practical multi-year programme centred on skills transfer, local capability and long-term development in Fiji.

REFERENCES AND POLICY SOURCES

- Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union - Articles 2, 3 and 7.
- Written Analysis accompanying the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union arrangements - including capacity building, capability improvement, technical assistance and building unity through sport, faith and culture.
- FIFA Forward programme - football-development investment, capacity development and knowledge sharing.
- FIFA Club Licensing - sporting, infrastructure, administrative, legal and financial standards.
- FIFA Women's Football Development programmes - technical expertise and capacity development across the women's game.

[VERBATIM REPORT]

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

UNION/TREATY

(1) FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION
(2) OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE (VEITACINI TREATY)

ENTITIES: (1) Ministry of Youth and Sports
(2) Fiji Rugby Union
(3) Fiji Football Association
VENUE: Big Committee Room (East Wing)
DATE: Monday, 21st September, 2026

VERBATIM REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE HELD AT THE COMMITTEE ROOM (EAST WING), PARLIAMENT PRECINCTS, GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, ON MONDAY, 21ST SEPTEMBER, 2026, AT 9.01 A.M.

Present

Hon. R.R. Sharma	-	Deputy Chairperson
Hon. V. Lal	-	Member
Hon. A. Bia	-	Alternate Member
Hon. S. Kumar	-	Alternate Member

Apologies

Hon. L.S. Qereqeretabua	-	Chairperson
Hon. P.K. Ravunawa	-	Member
Hon. I. Tuiwailevu	-	Member
Hon T.R. Matasawalu	-	Member

Interviewee/ Submittees: (1) Ministry of Youth and Sports
(2) Fiji Football Association
(3) Fiji Rugby Union

In Attendance:

Ministry of Youth and Sports

(1) Mr. Meli Nacuva - Permanent Secretary
(2) Mr. Jone Koroitamana - Manager, Sports (Sports Development & Infrastructure)

Fji Football Association

(1) Ms. Naziah Ali - Vice-President, Fiji Football Association

Fiji Rugby Union

(1) Mr. Talemo Waqa - Acting Chief Operations Officer
(2) Dr. Cathy Wong - President, FASANOC; Fiji Association of Sports National League Committee, Representative of 41 national federations in Fiji

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DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Honourable Members, representatives from the Ministry of Youth and Sports, Fiji Football Association (FFA) and Fiji Rugby Union (FRU), members of the media and the public, dear viewers, ladies and gentlemen; a very good morning to you all. It is my pleasure to welcome everyone present in this room and those joining us via live broadcast.

At the outset, for information purposes, I wish to advise that pursuant to the Standing Orders of Parliament, specifically Standing Order 111, all Committee meetings are open to the public

and the media. Accordingly, this submission meeting is open to the public and the members of the media. However, should there be any sensitive information relating to this submission that cannot be disclosed publicly, such information may be provided to the Committee either in writing or in a closed session. This will only be permitted in limited circumstances, including matters relating to national security, third party confidential information, personnel or human resource matters, Committee deliberation and the development of Committee's recommendations and Report.

I wish to remind honourable Members and Submittees that all comments and questions should be directed through the Chair. For viewers following this meeting live on *Facebook*, questions may be submitted via the comments section. Please, note that only relevant questions will be considered by the Committee. Members of the Committee may interject during the submission or, alternatively, questions will be raised at the conclusion of the presentation.

I further remind all present in this room that this is a parliamentary proceeding and all information provided is protected under the Parliamentary Powers and Privileges Act and the Standing Orders of Parliament. Slander or libel of any kind will not be condoned, and all information presented to the Committee should be factual.

In terms of meeting protocols, movement should be kept to a minimum. The usage of mobile phones is discouraged, and all mobile phones should be placed on silent for the duration of the meeting.

I will now introduce the members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence.

(Introduction of Committee Members and Secretariat)

Today, the Committee will receive an in-person joint submission from the the Ministry of Youth and Sports, FFA and FRU in relation to the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance or Veitacini Treaty, currently before the Committee.

I now invite the representatives present today to introduce themselves and proceed with their submission. You have 15 minutes for your opening statement, and then we will have questions from the Committee members. Kindly note that microphone should be turned on before you speak and turned off immediately after speaking, to avoid any disruption to the live submission. Please, proceed, the floor is yours.

(Introduction of Ministry of Youth and Sports, FFA and FRU Officials)

MR. M. NACUVA.- Deputy Chairperson, I will start with the five minutes that you have given and allowed the Team to also prepare their presentations.

The Ministry of Youth and Sports looks after all sports. We had tried to cover as best as we can the Treaty summary, the analysis that was done, so you will see that we have an Executive Summary that we have submitted.

However, in looking at the Treaty in detail, we looked at it from the angle of opportunities for Fiji's youth and athletics, and we are also looking at the area of sports development. I think it will be an opportunity for us to discuss further the implementation strategy of the Treaty itself, to see where we can see the impact on the various sporting bodies. The FFA, FRU and FASANOC will discuss this from their viewpoint.

As the Permanent Secretary for Youth and Sports, one of the things that has troubled me many times is how these treaties trickle all the way down to the development stage of both, sports and youth.

There has been a lot of discussions on youth and how they are utilised in terms of these various strategies, but in terms of how it actually impacts their wellbeing and how they progress through life tends to be very, very minimal. This is something that we would like to see with this Vuvale Treaty. I am sure there is discussion at your level, honourable Member, but this is something, as a representative of youth in the country, if we could be part of the implementation plan in a very strong

element, and not just be as tokens because that is something that we tend to see with our youth. So, we would like to see all of our sectors be involved in this.

Sporting is a strong developer of human beings. We have seen that as I am sure you would have, growing up in school, that sports complement the cognitive ability of a child and we would like to see that in the Treaty itself.

The Treaty covers a very generic component in terms of development of our youth and sports, but we would like to see a far more specific, targeted statement, and we would like to see that carried on to the implementation plan. So, we have made our submission, and I think the submission is quite detailed. I am not going to read it because of the time that we have been allocated, so I would like to pass on the time to our members and then have the discussion later on.

MR. T. WAQA.- Thank you very much, Deputy Chairperson and Members of the Committee. I would like to present, on behalf of the Fiji Rugby Union. I have given our Veimoana presentation and may I refer to that submission.

On the Veimoana Rugby Partnership, can I request, Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members of the Committee, if I can go through our CEO's letter, contained in the last few pages at the back, and I would like to put our presentation in the next nine minutes on that.

The Veimoana Rugby Partnership between Samoa, Tonga, Fiji and Australia has been in existence in the discussions with both, our Deputy Prime Minister and Prime Minister for the last few years. From there, may I put the attention of the Committee to the executive position of the Veimoana partnership funding proposal.

The partnership is developed in response to opportunities and challenges between the Rugby Union in the Pacific and Australia. The proposed investment is directed towards Rugby Union competitions, pathways, academies and community programmes. The governance framework is also vested in Rugby Union institutions and its stakeholders. Specifically, it is for participants, administrators, communities and stakeholders connected to Rugby Union.

The Veimoana partnership is there for pathways. It is also there for high-performance systems, youth development as our Permanent Secretary has mentioned, women's rugby, regional competitions, talent retention, coaching and officiating development and rugby-led community engagement.

The programme design and investment framework works onto that. This partnership will help Pacific Rugby Championship, both men and women in the 15s Rugby, Youth Rugby Under 18

and Under 20, Pacific 7s Championship, national high performance funding and academies, and also rugby for Resilient Community Development Programme.

On the governance and stewardship side, the partnership arrangement is responsible for strategic direction, programme prioritisation, performance oversight, accountability mechanism, and reporting obligations on the partnership and programme stewardship.

At this juncture, may I mention that this partnership, Veimoana, has been brought together by Rugby Australia in conjunction with DFAT, because of the two Rugby World Cups that are upcoming in Australia. With that has also been developed what we call an IBP, which is the Impact Beyond Pacifica, that is already in existence and has already started.

I concur with our Permanent Secretary for Youth and Sports, the social economic multiplier effect of this just does not rest on rugby - it will help in youth development and employment, support health and wellbeing, support women participation and empowerment, economic impact, and lastly, community resilience and social cohesion. So, it is more than just rugby, but rugby will be used as a vehicle or tool so that all these social impacts will be also enhanced in the partnership.

On the FRU position regarding scope and application, we have read through the Ministry of Youth and Sport's presentation that it can develop into other sports, or direct and indirect, and FRU always tend to support the development of sports. While the programme and partnership were geared towards rugby, we are happy to work with FASNOC, work with the Ministry of Youth and Sports and to continue that collaboration into developing our sports and youth of today.

On governance safeguards and reservations, first of all, there is already an original purpose. Our submission is, if anything that comes out of that purpose, we would like to get all parties concerned to change that because the original intent was already developed prior in which Deputy PM Kamikamica was a party to the discussion. Also, the programme integrity, preservation and consultation, we believe all parties can come together to work with.

May I ask for no restriction on separate multi-sport initiatives. As I have mentioned, we are happy to work with all other sports, the Ministry of Youth and Sports and the Government, and continuously use rugby as a platform to help youth of today in their wellness, wellbeing, as well as social implications.

On reservation of stakeholder position, again, as I had reiterated, we are happy to adjust it, but all parties to come together for any amendments to the original discussion that was originally set out in the original intent. I will not go into much detail, but I would like to draw your attention to 9.3 - Rugby's economic and tourism contribution.

Rugby has so much, from the RNC in Europe, in the UK, and also in working towards 2027 Rugby World Cup. We believe rugby can help in our economic standpoint on tourism contribution. Therefore, we have in the last few years, analysed every tournament that we run here, international tournament, and the economic impact that it has done on accommodation and hospitality, aviation and transport, restaurants and tourism operators, local vendors and communities, employment and casual work, events and entertainment, international media exposure, and commercial sponsorship.

Also, sports tourism has been impacted upon whenever there is an international fixture. Next year, we are looking at the competition between Samoa, Tonga, Fiji and Australia A. We are working towards playing with Japan here in Fiji. Last week, we also secured a test match against South Africa. For the first time, Fiji will be playing South Africa, which is a home test. We are looking at playing it in Western Australia, but everything else comes through Fiji. Those are tourism impacts that is being done. This year, we have Fijiana play agaisnt South Africa and in next year, we also have other tournaments that are coming forth.

Rugby has earned confidence from international partners. As I had mentioned, impact beyond Pacifika has already started and it is not only with the Veimoana Partnership, but also coming out of the DFAT funding, and that has helped run youth games. You must have seen that straight after the Dean's Trophy Competition, there was another competition in the West that was funded by Impact Beyond Pasifika (IBP).

Currently, we are holding financial governance training for all our membership, including schools rugby, primary and secondary school, also being supported by IBP funding that is running parallel with the Veimoana.

Government investments should strengthen, not duplicate, what national sporting organisations have built. We are very supportive of this, and we are thankful to the Government for all the support in rugby in terms of competitions. What we would like to move is the infrastructure which needs a little bit of attention. We are always running short of grounds and short of gyms and we would like to present from there.

May I end my presentation, and I refer you to the last page, as time has caught up with me. Fiji does not have a shortage of sporting talent. The national opportunity is to build the systems, infrastructure and investment environment, that allow that talent to reach its full potential.

Accordingly, the FRU respectfully requests that this Committee recognises the:

(1) Rugby Union's specific purpose and origins of the Veimoana Partnership;

(2) acknowledges the governance and stewardship arrangement established by the
participating rugby organisations;

(3) notes that the programme design, funding framework and performance measures are directed towards rugby union and outcomes;

(4) recognises and substantiates social, economic and community benefits expected out of this partnership; and

(5) support the principle that any material modification to the Partnership's objectives, governance and framework, all parties should come and discuss forthwith.

Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members of the Committee and colleagues, there ends our submission from the FRU and the Veimoana Partnership on the topic at hand. Thank you very much.

MS. N. ALI.- Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members of the Committee, before I begin, I would like to acknowledge that FFA was invited to appear before the Committee and contribute in terms of the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance. Given the short timeframe, FFA was not able to undertake the internal process and consultation required to present a written submission within the timeframe. We request that we be given some time to do so.

Having said that, I would also like to make an oral submission of some of the contributions that we would like to make. As you are already aware, Fiji already has a strong relationship in terms of sports with Australia, demonstrated by the initiatives through the Fijian Drua and other existing initiatives.

We see football as an emerging professional platform through Bula FC. The opportunity for this would be through pathways, technical development and women's football, also looking at youth exchanges and stronger institutional partnerships.

There are three key areas that we would like to be noted in terms of the areas we see as potential for collaboration and priority for Fiji Football:

(1) Create a stronger pathway for Fijian players and teams into Australian Football. We would like to explore structured opportunities for Fijian national teams, youth players and professional players to access Australian competitions, whether it is through clubs, academy, training camps, or high-performance environments.

(2) We would like to build Fiji Football's capacity through the long-term cooperation that covers areas in coaching, referees, technical directors,

administrators, women's football, youth development, safeguarding, sports science and other technical areas where Fiji lacks at the moment.

(3) Include football as a practical component of the Vuvale Union Workplan. If Fiji football could be mentioned and detailed in terms of what practical engagement can be included in terms of football, in particular, as well as any other relevant areas that relate to football and youth development when it comes to sports. You would note the existing partnership between Fiji and Australia. You see the success of the Fijian Drua men and women and how that has shown opportunities. That have arisen from that collaboration and has seen the growth and development of rugby. We would like that to also translate to football. We do not need to start anything from scratch, we just need to look at what is working and how we can build on that, and we would like to be very much involved in the workplans that you will be working on in the future so that we have the ability to design, which would also have the direct impact that we would like to have.

Finally, I would like to raise that Bula FC, the first ever professional football club for Fiji, is a potential organisation, a club that we can leverage, as we have done with the Drua. Bula FC is competing in the Oceania Professional League, and it is a great pathway for Fijian footballers. On behalf of the FFA, I feel that there could be a lot more done if this was formalised.

We also feel that if the relationship was strengthened between Australian Football and Fiji Football, coming through this programme, we will see more player pathways and also the potential to have professional training camps as we have had a few in the past but we would like to see a lot more of this that is possible in the future.

We also feel that while Bula FC is a private company like Drua, it is part of Fiji Football's mandate to see that professional football grows in Fiji. For us, in the future, if we look at how success would look like in terms of this partnership, we would like to see even more Fijian players accessing the Australian Football environments. Looking at our current environment and the lack of technical ability, technical personnel and professional development, this would be a strong area that we would like to focus on in terms of the human resources that we have.

I would like to end our presentation by saying that Fiji Football does not see football just as a practical vehicle, but also a people-to-people relationship between Fiji and Australia. I hope that we are able to be given some time to present our formal submission after this meeting. *Vinaka*.

DR. C. WONG.- Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members of the Standing Committee,

FASANOC welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's consideration for the FijiAustralia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance. We had intended to bring forward a comprehensive proposition early next year around the Fiji Olympic and Paralympic Decade 20262036 and the Brisbane 2032 Games for Oceania. However, the decisions now being

contemplated through the Vuvale relationship would help shape Fiji-Australia sporting co-operation.

It is important that Fiji's wider Olympic and Paralympic sporting system is part of that discussion from the outset. Our message is straightforward - Fiji's sport extends well beyond rugby union, rugby league and football. These sports are enormously important to Fiji and FASANOC welcomes the Australian investment supporting their development.

Fiji has already demonstrated what is possible. Fiji's wider Olympic and Paralympic sporting systems has produced Olympic medallists, Commonwealth medallists and world championships in 13 sports. Many of these achievements have come from sporting organisations that have very limited financial resources, very limited facilities, limited professional capacity and limited sustained high performance support system, as mentioned by the two previous speakers.

Most of Fiji's Olympic sports have no full-time administrators, no full-time coaches and depend heavily on volunteers. and cannot afford sufficient local and international competitions and have limited access to the sports science that is involved to perform at high level.

As mentioned by a previous speaker, Fiji does not have a talent problem. We have a capacity and systems problem. The question is, what Fiji could achieve if serious sustained investment were placed behind that talent? We need to recognise the investment imbalance.

On rugby, for the record, I would like to declare my conflict of interest as a rugby union director, but I am speaking on behalf of the 41 national federations in Fiji. Australia's investment in rugby union, rugby league and football across the Pacific has delivered important outcomes, including stronger competitions and professional pathways. At this stage, what we would like to see is the same strategic ambition now needs to extend to Fiji's wider Olympic and Paralympic supporting systems. Otherwise, we risk strengthening sports that already possess good quality skills and not strengthening the other sports that have potential to medal at the podium without the same support system.

Our request is, the response is not a redistribution from one sport to another - it is a substantial expansion of the investment base. The Australian Government has shown this in support of Rugby League Australia, Rugby League PNG, Rugby League Fiji, Samoa and Tonga.

Brisbane 2032 changes the equation. Brisbane 2032 is not simply another Olympic and Paralympic Games. From its earliest development, it was positioned as an opportunity, extending beyond Australia to the wider Oceania region. The Australian candidature was presented as a bid for Oceania, supported at the highest levels of the Australian Government

and the Olympic and Paralympic leadership. Importantly, Australia's own parliamentary examination of Brisbane 2032 identified a Games for Oceania, a cross-cutting theme in Games legacy, planning and recognised the potential for Australia and Oceania to use the Games as a joint platform for high performance success, sustainable capacity building and wider economic and social benefits. Games for Oceania is, therefore, not a proposition by FASANOC - it is pre-existed in the Brisbane 2032 bid process.

Deputy Chairperson, through you, on the Fiji Olympic and Paralympic Decade, in July 2026, Fiji established its Fiji Olympic and Paralympic Decade (10 years). We have appointed a strategic lead in this space.

Since early 2026, the Brisbane 2032 has focused specifically on Fiji and the development of sporting economic, social and broader national opportunities. Our objective is building the high performance pathway that Fiji needs.

Brisbane 2032 requires Fiji to progressively build a sustainable high performance system. As mentioned by our previous speakers, we have the talent, we do not have the system and the capacity framework, and that is what we need to build in Fiji should we want to compete at international level and should we want to make sure that Fiji remains healthy.

The next two to four years are critical. Athletes with Brisbane 2032 potential need to be identified, developed and progressed, and exposed through this pathway. I will not repeat what the previous speaker has said - we need the systems process, and we need it now.

I will now talk about opening new doors for trade and investment. The DECADE, as we call it, is not simply a sporting programme. One of the most important opportunities is to use Brisbane 2032 and the international surrounding Olympic and Paralympic Movement to open new doors for Fiji's trade, investment and economic development. This proposition was advanced at the recent FijiAustralia and Australia-Fiji Business Council Joint Forum where Brisbane 2032, Investment Fiji, Queensland and FASANOC came together and presented the sporting economic opportunity, the tourism opportunity, and the wider national benefit.

Brisbane 2032 will generate significant procurement, supply chain opportunities. Fiji should identify areas where our businesses have genuine comparative advantage, prepare them to meet the required standards, and develop partnerships with Australian companies through which Fijian businesses can participate as suppliers, subcontractors, consortium members, and joint venture partners.

However, the opportunity extends well beyond Games procurement. The Fiji-Australian Government's investment agencies, businesses and other institutes create enabling pathways with Fiji businesses. So, this is the business sector that sports bring into Fiji.

On major international sporting events, as mentioned by our previous speaker, FASANOC is also exploring the establishment of a national major sports strategy and national major games events organizing committee. The proposal of this is for Fiji to host, by 2031,10 international accredited recognized events in Fiji. Right now, we host about four to five on a yearly basis.

The proposed organization will provide National Sporting Federations with professional capacity in international bidding, Government coordination, sponsorship, event management, tourism activation, broadcasting, logistics and commercial development. The operating principle is a simple one: build once - use often.

I will now talk about a healthier and more active Fiji. Fiji carries an enormous burden on NCDs and physical inactivity. This presents an equally important health, social and economic challenge. I will not go into details on the data, we are all aware of that, and I put on my medical hat.

The DECADE initiative is looking to explore long-term national physical inactivity initiative, and this will be brought forward in our detailed proposal come January 2027.

A fit-for-purpose Olympic and Paralympic visa pathway: Four years ago, as part of the bid, the Australian Government agreed to look at the visa pathway. We are four years down the line and nothing has moved in this space. This is one of the most important opportunities for a fit-for-purpose long-term visa pathway for Fiji's Olympic and Paralympic athletes. We ask the standing Committee to make sure that this is part of the Vuvale Partnership. This requires action now.

Our athletes are already training now. Our athletes' spouses are already staying at home because they cannot join their spouses while they are training in Australia. Athletes targeting Los Angeles 2028 and Brisbane 2032 need sustained access to a high-performance environment.

Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, FASANOC asks that the Vuvale Framework support the urgent development of a dedicated, long-term, multiple-entry Olympic and Paralympic mobility pathway for selected athletes and demonstrate international potential towards approved coaches and essential support personnel. The pathway should enable athletes to live, train, compete, work and study in Australia; travel free for international competitions; and access appropriate support services. This should be treated as an early Vuvale priority. As I mentioned earlier, Deputy Chairperson, this was enabled four years ago, and we have seen no movement in this space.

FASANOC's Detailed Submission: Deputy Chairperson, through you, FASANOC asks the Committee to regard today's presentation as an initial submission. The Olympic and Paralympic Decade is generating substantial work across high performance, major international events, trade and investment, physical activity, and the wider Fiji-Australian collaboration. Over the past few months, we have begun engaging with Investment Fiji, the Investment Facilitation Committee, the Fiji National Sports Commission, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and our 41 National Member Federations and the corporate sector.

Subject to the Committee's agreement, FASANOC intends to provide a more detailed supplementary submission before 2nd October, 2026, expanding upon the opportunities outlined today, and identifying areas where the Vuvale relationship could support the emerging Olympic and Paralympic Decade.

Deputy Chairperson, through you, the Committee and the Strategic Lead is working behind the scene right now to prepare a properly costed Olympic and Paralympic Decade plan by December 2026, and we should have it ready by January 2027.

In closing, Deputy Chairperson, Fiji has already demonstrated what its athletes can achieve with comparatively limited resources. Brisbane 2032 presents an opportunity for a different magnitude, time to prepare, proximity to the games, a Games for Oceania commitment, and a strong Fiji-Australia Vuvale relationship, operating at the same time. The opportunity now is to extend the same level of strategic ambition to all sports in Fiji, not just Fiji rugby. I take that as a rugby person.

FASANOC wants to work with Fiji, the Australian Government, our National Sporting Federations, businesses, and partners, to turn this decade into strong athletes, stronger supporting institutions, healthier communities, new economic opportunities, and a deeper Fiji-Australia partnership.

The Games for Oceania opens the door. The Vuvale relationship gives Fiji and Australia an important platform to work through it together. Deputy Chairperson, in closing, I would like to just mention that the Standing Committee, please, recognise FASANOC. We are an autonomy organisation, and we ask that you recognise our autonomy as a sole representative of the Olympic space, the Commonwealth space and the Pacific Games space. We work collaboratively with all our stakeholders.

In closing, I would like to say that come July 2027, Fiji will be putting a bid to host the 2035 Pacific Games in Fiji and for that, we need not only infrastructure, as alluded to by the previous speaker, why can we not host our games in Fiji? Because we do not have the infrastructure to host international rugby events in Fiji.

Deputy Chairperson, through you, that is our initial submission. We humbly request that the Standing Committee grant us an opportunity to present our detailed submission before 2nd October, 2026. Thank you, Deputy Chairperson

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you to everyone for their very brief contribution. In fact, I would like to thank honourable Aliki Bia, who joined our Committee and suggested to have all of you invited because we felt youth and sports was not directly reflected. I think what we can gather is we mostly and sincerely welcome a written and thorough submission on the way forward, the gaps that exist and where the commitments have, sort of, been kept in the dark.

We also do not have much time on our hands, so I will open the floor to the honourable Members for any questions that they have.

HON. A. BIA.- Thank you, Deputy Chairperson. Through you, I just wanted to throw the discussion out there because all the different sporting bodies and the Ministry is explaining the proposals that they have, but when you talk about a treaty, the Articles are the main priorities of what the treaty is about. If you look at the 11 Articles in the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union, there is nowhere that directly mentions about sports, so if you do not have it in the Article, then why include it in the Workplan?

If you look at all the proposals and submissions today, we want direct impact. So, if you do not have it in one of the 11 Articles, will we have that direct impact if it is included in the Workplan? I am just putting that discussion out there because I think it is very important to include it in one of the Articles, maybe sports and youth development or sports and education. If you look at the 11 Articles, it does not have education. How will you have that direct impact on the ground when you do not include it in the 11 Articles?

HON. V. LAL.- Deputy Chairperson, through you, thank you Assistant Minister. My question is, a greater percentage of Fiji's population are youth, our young boys and girls. for During the formulation of this Veitacini Treaty and Vuvale Partnership, as PS for the Ministry of Youth and Sports, were you consulted?

MR. M. NACUVA.- Sir, that was the question that was asked prior to this and, if any, was very little consultation, and this is not something new for us. Most of the time, we get called onto the table when it is closer to the implementation of treaties or of strategies of national interest because of the ability of the Ministry of Youth and Sports to reach out to the youth because we have a very strong platform with the youth. However, in terms of development, in terms of coming up with the overarching strategies, there is always very little involvement of the Ministry.

HON. V. LAL.- Deputy Chairperson, through you, the reason I asked this question is that I can see in the presentation of FRU, there is already a Veimoana Partnership where in item 9.5, you are saying that Government investment should not duplicate. What I see is more or less the duplication of the VeiMoana Partnership which you already have. My question is, what more does this partnership - the Veitacini Treaty and the Vuvale Partnership do, apart from whatever you have in the Veimoana Partnership?

DR. C. WONG.- Deputy Chairperson, through you, the Veimoana Partnership, as you rightly said, was through the three sports with Fiji Rugby, Samoa, Tonga and Fiji. As alluded to by honourable Bia, the 11 Articles do not specifically mention sports, but what we would like to see is that this extend beyond the other sports - the bigger youth and sports sector be brought into that space. So, it is not just directed to certain sports, but directed to youth and sports extended throughout, if I may. Thank you, Deputy Chairperson.

HON. V. LAL.- Thank you for that. Let me just make it clear that athletic brain drain is also there. My question to you, Sir, how will the Ministry of Youth and Sports, together with FRU, FASANOC and FFA see that you negotiate - streamline long-term sports visa settings in Australia for Fijian professionals because we do not want to lose people. We already are losing people in all the other fields. We want to retain our sports personalities so how are we going to negotiate this?

MR. M. NACUVA.- The Ministry has been on its journey on the development of the Fiji Institute of Sports. What you will notice is that through the Deans and through the Coca-Cola Championship, through schools, there is always a break in terms of sporting career pathways, that high school seems to be the highest point. Once they go beyond that, it is very difficult to pick up on the top athletes. So, we have started the development of the Fiji Institute of Sports to bridge this pathway. Each of the different sporting bodies, especially the two major ones, have their own Academies. They have their own high-performance pathways. What we are looking at is for the entire sporting cadre for Fiji.

With that, I also welcome the inputs from the two bodies, including FASANOC. We are beginning to develop the Fiji Institute of Sports; we have started that. There is a new sporting Act that is coming online and, hopefully, that will bridge this gap that we have.

HON. V. LAL.- Thank you. Just adding to that, what collective strategy will the National Sports Sector use, to ensure that youth empowerment which we have just spoken about – the programmes, the high-performance sports academies and the grassroots community, which infrastructure are budgeted and co-funded under this Vuvale Partnership.

MR. T. WAQA.- From the FRU perspective, Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, we have worked with all stakeholders, especially the Discipline Forces, the Ministry of Education

and the Ministry of Health, apart from the Ministry of Youth and Sports, to make sure that we attend to the youths of today from the platform of rugby. We have got junior rugby, which is the primary school, and then Deans which is for secondary school.

Last week, FRU assisted in running the Inter-Tertiary. That is another cohort of group that we have been missing in the past. We would like to continue to work through with the Ministry of Youth and Sports on our youth platform because that is also something that is geared towards our strategic plan and our direction for the next 10 years.

Our Vuvale Partnership, as has been mentioned by Dr. Wong and also President of FASANOC, has been put forth in response to the funding mechanism that was going towards rugby league in PNG. For that matter, our delegation from Rugby House brought in Samoa and Tonga, just to counter that move. Otherwise, our national sport, if you might say, would have lost a lot of funding through Australian Government in trying to fund so much to rugby league in PNG, and they have done that. So, the Veimoana Partnership that we have put forth is to counter that and making sure that we also have a fair share of the funding that will come through.

In response to that, we have been working with the Government of Australia and Rugby Australia, not only in sports development or rugby development, but sports for development. We have got 'Get into Rugby PLUS', which is a values education initiative. We have got 'Rise Rugby Fiji', which is a women's rugby initiative. These are targeted initiatives that are co-funded in this partnership so that we are helping the community - an indirect to rugby competition and rugby development. So, this is what sports sport development is bringing into the picture, and we believe that it is helping our youth of today and we would like to strengthen that area also.

MR. M. NACUVA.- Through you, Deputy Chairperson, to add on to that, some of the responsibilities fall on the Ministry. If you look for funding, you need to have a proper and strong monitoring and evaluation system in place. It is one of the areas where the Ministry has a huge opportunity in, that we need to have a stronger MEL system in place, so that we can justify funding that is being given to the Ministry. That is something that we need to have for our sporting funding because coming to the table and seeking for more funds, if you do not have strong justifications of the funding that was given, it makes it very difficult for those that are funding to justify funding opportunities and that is something that the Ministry of Youth and Sports will strengthen - its systems, as Dr. Cathy Wong, has said. We have a major systems problem with our sporting bodies, and in ensuring those systems are strengthened, especially, the governance component, so that we can have data and information that is on the ground to be filtered all the way up to areas like this, where we can have strong numbers to justify the plea of the various spotting bodies.

HON. V. LAL.- Deputy Chairperson, perhaps, a last one from me; your Veimoana Partnership is with Samoa and Tonga, Fiji and Australia. However, this Vuvale Partnership and the Veitacini Treaty, they explicitly talk about Fiji and Australia only. In Article 4(2)(b), will national sporting bodies face regulatory oversight or commercial restrictions when dealing with countries outside of Australia, just like we already have in your Veimoana Partnership?

DR. C. WONG.- Deputy Chairperson, through you, that is something that we have discussed at the Oceania level, on the restrictions of the territorial rights, yes. In the Olympics space, it is quite restrictive because Olympic owns its space, the same thing in the Commonwealth space. But in the business sector space, that is something that the Fiji Government, with the appropriate ministers, need to take through to make sure that that restriction is discussed at the table. We are not at the table.

Yes, we did discuss at the Fiji-Australian Business Council about making sure that, should we go to another partner, does that affect this Vuvale thing? The answer, Sir, we do not know. Right now, we do not know, because we are not privy to the information at this stage. However, we would like to see that whoever is responsible for doing this treaty, that they make sure they look at that and make sure that that is given the right framework to be able to operate as a successful business partner, both from Fiji- Australia's side, but also from Fiji's side to make sure it does not limit Fiji to just Australia - it opens us to other markets. Thank you, Sir.

HON. V. LAL.- Did you raise this issue with our Chief Negotiator here in Fiji, who is the PS in the Office of the Prime Minister?

DR. C. WONG.- No, Sir, I am not privileged. I am way below that level. We only put it up at the Fiji-Australian Business Council Forum.

MS. N. ALI.- Deputy Chairperson, through you, I would like to just respond to a couple of questions earlier in terms of the brain drain. I think, when it comes to football, we specifically encourage that our players go abroad because them playing outside of Fiji in a more competitive environment, improves their playing capacity. Then when they come back and play for the national team, they strengthen our team. I feel that it is really important to have this, sort of, partnership with Australia because they have developed a League that is way above or more competitive than ours.

If you look at Bula FC, we have just started this year, and a maximum of only 30 players can sign professional contracts with Bula FC. The others, if they are much better, we really encourage that they go out, and then at some stage, they will come back to play for Bula FC or the national team. But really, that is the pathway that we see because we cannot provide that right now in Fiji.

Having said that, I would say in terms of football in general, our plan is to really explore the entire country. I feel like we are not targeting the rural areas and if we do have the capacity to reach out, whether in terms of just providing facilities through Government, people are then able to access this sport and we will have even more talent coming through. Thank you.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you for your submission and honourable Members for your questions. I am glad we invited you here. We have heard you all and continue working in close coordination. Sports not only unlocks the potential of our people but also brings a lot of economic value, and Fiji needs to be seen as a hub that hosts so many regional and international games.

Yes, we have the Vuvale Union before us and I think the work goes on the shoulders of the PS and the Ministry, to make their way through in the Workplan and have the agenda ready of what is required.

The Committee welcomes all the written submissions, the gaps, the solutions, the way forward, and we hope to do our best with this before we submit it to Parliament. We appreciate your time and cooperation, and we look forward to your continued engagement, should the Committee require any further information.

On that note, submittees and Members, I declare this meeting closed. *Vinaka*.

The Committee Meeting adjourned at 9.55 a.m.

Higher Education Commission Fiji

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PUBLIC SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

Fiji–Australia Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty)

Submission by Dr Eci Tekuru Naisele
Director, Higher Education Commission Fiji

Honourable Chairperson, Honourable Members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, members of the Secretariat, ladies and gentlemen:

Ni sa bula vinaka and good morning.

Thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the Higher Education Commission Fiji on the Fiji–Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance, or Veitacini Treaty.

From the perspective of the Higher Education Commission Fiji, these agreements should not be viewed only through the traditional lens of foreign affairs, defence or security.

They also present an important opportunity to invest in what we believe is one of Fiji's greatest strategic assets — our people.

For HECF, therefore, the significance of the Vuvale Union lies particularly in its potential to strengthen higher education, technical and vocational education and training, digital capability, skills development, qualifications, institutional capacity and the pathways connecting education to employment and national development.

Education and skills as foundations of national resilience

Honourable Members, national security in the modern world is much broader than military security.

A country is also secure when it has the skills to build and maintain its infrastructure; when it has technicians, engineers, teachers, health professionals and digital specialists; when its institutions can respond to technological change; and when its young people have genuine pathways into productive employment.

A skilled population strengthens economic resilience.

A digitally capable population strengthens our ability to participate in the modern economy.

And a quality higher education and TVET system gives Fiji greater capacity to solve its own problems and determine its own future.

The Vuvale Union recognises this connection.

Its prosperity and people commitments recognise the importance of quality education, economic growth, resilient infrastructure, transition to a digital economy and stronger links between our peoples.

From HECF's perspective, this is significant because it places human-capital development alongside infrastructure and economic development.

We strongly support that direction.

TVET and Centres of Excellence

One of the most promising opportunities arising from the Fiji–Australia relationship is the strengthening of technical and vocational education and training.

Through Pacific Australia Skills, Australia and Fiji have already begun a new phase of cooperation in skills development.

The opening of the Vuvale Skills Hub at Walu Bay is a practical example of what this partnership can achieve.

The Hub provides a shared training environment that can support Fijian training institutions, including institutions that may not themselves possess all the specialised equipment, machinery or facilities required for high-quality practical training.

This is important.

We should not measure the strength of our TVET system only by how many institutions we have. We must measure it by the quality, relevance and accessibility of the training that learners receive.

The proposed development of **TVET Centres of Excellence** provides an opportunity to take this further.

HECF sees these Centres of Excellence as potentially becoming national and regional platforms for high-quality training, modern equipment, trainer development, industry engagement, innovation and the sharing of specialised facilities.

They can help Fiji respond to skills shortages in priority sectors and ensure that our training remains connected to emerging technologies and changing industry requirements.

Importantly, these centres should complement and strengthen existing Fijian higher education institutions rather than duplicate them.

Our objective must be to build the capacity of Fiji's education and training system as a whole.

From training to a national skills ecosystem

The partnership is already moving beyond individual training programmes.

Pacific Australia Skills is supporting initiatives connected to the broader skills ecosystem, including institutional and programme support, access to the Vuvale Skills Hub, the National Skills Fair and Career Expo, and the development of the National Skills Competition.

These initiatives matter because skills development does not begin and end in a classroom.

Young people need to see skills, experience skills and understand where skills can take them.

Career fairs expose students to occupations and industries.

Skills competitions create standards of excellence and give young tradespeople something to aspire towards.

Shared training facilities improve access to modern equipment.

Institutional partnerships strengthen the providers themselves.

Together, these initiatives can help change the perception of TVET.

For too long, vocational education in many societies has sometimes been viewed as a second choice.

We must change that mindset.

A qualified electrician, welder, automotive technician, carpenter, refrigeration specialist or digital technician is not someone who has failed academically.

They are skilled professionals whose knowledge is essential to the functioning of a modern economy.

The Vuvale Union provides an opportunity to elevate that message nationally.

Digital transformation and the future workforce

A second area of major importance to HECF is digital transformation.

As outlined under the economic pillar of the Vuvale Union, identifies support for Fiji's digital transition as one of the transformative initiatives.

For higher education, this cannot simply mean purchasing computers or constructing data centres.

Digital infrastructure must be matched by digital capability.

Fiji will need people who can design, operate, maintain and protect increasingly sophisticated digital systems.

That means developing skills in areas such as cybersecurity, data analytics, artificial intelligence, cloud technologies, digital systems, software development and other emerging technologies.

Our higher education institutions will therefore need to continuously review programmes, develop new qualifications and micro-credentials, strengthen the digital capability of lecturers and trainers, and work much more closely with industry.

This is particularly relevant as HECF reviews and strengthens Fiji's qualifications architecture to ensure that it remains responsive to technological change, new forms of learning and changing labour-market requirements.

Our goal should not simply be for Fiji to consume technology developed elsewhere.

Our ambition should be to develop Fijians who can create, manage, adapt and lead technology.

Opportunities for Fijian students

The education dimension of the Vuvale relationship also creates important opportunities for student mobility.

The proposed arrangements from **2029**, under which selected cohorts of Fijian students will be able to access Australian universities under domestic fee arrangements, could significantly expand educational opportunities for Fijians.

HECF welcomes initiatives that reduce barriers to quality education and give Fijian students access to specialised programmes, research environments and expertise that may not presently be available locally.

But we should view this as more than an opportunity for individuals to study overseas.

It should become an instrument of national capability development.

Where Fiji has identified critical skills shortages, overseas study opportunities can be strategically aligned to those needs.

Students can acquire specialised knowledge and return to strengthen our universities, industries, public institutions and communities.

This requires coordination between government, higher education institutions, industry and scholarship agencies so that investment in overseas education contributes directly to Fiji's long-term workforce priorities.

Mobility must also mean knowledge returns

Honourable Members, increased mobility naturally brings another consideration — the potential loss of skilled people.

We should acknowledge that risk.

But our response should not be to restrict opportunity.

Our response should be to create a system where mobility results in knowledge circulation rather than simply brain drain.

A Fijian who studies or trains in Australia should remain connected to Fiji.

There should be opportunities for graduates to return, contribute, conduct research, teach, mentor, establish businesses, transfer technology or participate in joint projects.

The success of the Vuvale education partnership should therefore not only be measured by the number of Fijians who go to Australia.

It should also be measured by what knowledge, capability and opportunity comes back to Fiji.

Quality assurance and the role of HECF

This is where the mandate of the Higher Education Commission Fiji becomes particularly important.

As opportunities expand, quality must remain at the centre.

More training is not automatically better training.

More qualifications are not automatically better qualifications.

Qualifications must remain credible, relevant and recognised.

Training must meet appropriate standards.

Programmes must respond to genuine labour-market needs.

And learners must be able to move between institutions and qualifications through clear pathways, recognition of prior learning and appropriate credit-transfer arrangements.

HECF therefore sees an important role for itself in supporting implementation through:

- quality assurance and accreditation;
- strengthening Fiji's qualifications system;
- supporting recognition and portability of qualifications;
- facilitating pathways between TVET and higher education;
- promoting industry-responsive programme development;
- supporting micro-credentials and emerging forms of learning;
- strengthening institutional quality; and
- ensuring that new initiatives complement Fiji's national education and workforce priorities.

We would also welcome deeper regulator-to-regulator and institution-to-institution cooperation with Australian counterparts in areas such as quality assurance, qualification recognition, research, digital education, trainer development and emerging technologies.

A regional opportunity

Honourable Members, Fiji should also think beyond our national borders.

Our geographic position, established higher education institutions and regional connections give us an opportunity

to become a Pacific hub for skills, qualifications and quality higher education.

The Centres of Excellence envisaged under the partnership should therefore not only address Fiji's workforce needs.

Over time, they could help Fiji provide specialised training for learners from across the Pacific.

This would strengthen Fiji's role in regional human-capital development while supporting the wider objective of a peaceful, resilient and prosperous Pacific.

In this sense, education becomes part of the architecture of peace.

When young people have skills, qualifications and employment pathways, communities become more resilient.

When countries share knowledge and build institutions together, regional relationships become stronger.

And when Pacific nations develop their own human capability, we strengthen our collective ability to address the challenges facing our region.

Implementation will determine success

The Commission nevertheless recognises that the promise of the Vuvale Union will ultimately be determined by implementation.

The proposed 10-year Work Plan presents an opportunity for sustained cooperation, but implementation should include clear responsibilities, measurable outcomes and regular review.

From the higher education and skills perspective, HECF would encourage attention to several matters: alignment with Fiji's national qualifications and quality-assurance requirements; coordination among government agencies, education providers and industry; sustainable investment in infrastructure and trainer capability; mechanisms for recognition and portability of qualifications; equitable access for women, persons with disabilities and learners outside

major urban centres; and systems to measure whether training is actually producing employment and economic outcomes.

We should not measure success simply by how much funding is committed or how many programmes are launched.

We should ask:

Are Fijians gaining relevant skills?

Are employers finding the skills they need?

Are our institutions becoming stronger?

Are our qualifications internationally credible?

Are our young people finding meaningful pathways into employment and enterprise?

And ultimately:

Is Fiji becoming more capable, resilient and self-reliant because of this partnership?

Those should be among our measures of success.

Conclusion

Honourable Chairperson and Members of the Committee,

From the perspective of the Higher Education Commission Fiji, we view the education and skills dimensions of the Fiji–Australia Vuvale Union positively.

It gives us an opportunity to strengthen TVET, establish Centres of Excellence, accelerate digital capability, expand educational pathways, strengthen our institutions and qualifications, deepen cooperation with Australia and prepare Fijians for the changing world of work.

But perhaps its greatest opportunity is much simpler.

It is an opportunity to invest in people.

Buildings will age.

Technology will change.

Industries will evolve.

But when we invest in the knowledge, skills, creativity and confidence of our people, that investment continues from one generation to another.

For HECF, therefore, the Vuvale Union should help us build not simply a workforce for today's vacancies, but a generation of Fijians capable of creating Fiji's future.

A future where a young person in Suva, Labasa, Nadi, Savusavu, Kadavu or any other part of Fiji can see a clear pathway from education, to skills, to qualifications, to meaningful employment and lifelong learning.

A future where TVET and higher education work together.

A future where our qualifications open doors both at home and internationally.

And a future where Fiji does not simply participate in technological and economic change — Fiji helps lead it in the Pacific.

That, Honourable Members, is the opportunity we see before us.

Vinaka vakalevu, and thank you.

[VERBATIM REPORT]

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

UNION/TREATY

(1) FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION
(2) OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE (VEITACINI TREATY)

ENTITY: Higher Education Commission Fiji
VENUE: Big Committee Room (East Wing)
DATE: Wednesday, 23rd September, 2026

VERBATIM REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE HELD AT THE COMMITTEE ROOM (EAST WING), PARLIAMENT PRECINCTS, GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, ON WEDNESDAY, 23RD SEPTEMBER, 2026, AT 10.00 A.M.

Present

Hon. L.S. Qereqeretabua	-	Chairperson
Hon. R.R. Sharma	-	Deputy Chairperson
Hon. V. Lal	-	Member
Hon. A. Bia	-	Alternate Member

Apologies

Hon. P.K. Ravunawa	-	Member
Hon. I. Tuiwailevu	-	Member
Hon. T.R. Matasawalevu	-	Member

Submittee: **Higher Education Commission Fiji** In Attendance:

(1) Dr. Eci T. Naisele - Director
(2) Mr. Epi Rawalai - Committee's Manager

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Honourable Members and representatives from the Higher Education Commission Fiji, members of the media and members of the public; a very good morning. It is my pleasure to welcome everyone present in this room, as well as those who are joining us live on the broadcast.

I wish to advise that pursuant to the Standing Orders of Parliament, specifically Standing Order 111, all Committee meetings are open to the public and to the media, so this submission is open to the public and the media. If there is any sensitive information relating to this submission that cannot be disclosed publicly, however, that information can be provided to the Committee either in writing or in a closed session. This is only permitted in limited circumstances, including matters relating to national security, third party confidential information, personnel or human resource matters and also during the Committee's own deliberations as we prepare our report to go back to Parliament.

I want to remind honourable Members and our representatives from the Higher Education Commission that all comments and questions should be directed through me, the Chairperson. For viewers following this meeting live on *Facebook*, you may submit your questions via the comment section but, please, note that only relevant questions will be considered by the Committee's secretariat. Members of the Committee might interject during your submission or alternatively, will wait until you have finished your presentation to ask our questions.

I want to remind everyone as well that this is a parliamentary proceeding, and all information provided is protected under the Parliamentary Powers and Privileges Act and the Standing Orders of Parliament. Any slander or libel of any kind will not be condoned, and all information presented to the Committee should be factual.

In terms of protocols, remember that there are cameras around us, so we ask that we keep movement to a minimum and also, we ask that you place your mobile phones on vibrate mode or silent mode.

I would now like to introduce to you the Members of our Standing Committee.

(Introduction of Committee Members)

MADAM CHAIRPERSON. - To members of the media and also to the public, the Committee will now receive an in-person submission from the Higher Education Commission Fiji in relation to the Fiji-AustraliaVuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance or Veitacini Treaty, currently before this Committee.

We now invite the representatives to introduce themselves before they continue with their submission. We would like to remind you that you have around 15 minutes for your opening statement and then we will have questions from the Committee Members. Please, remember to turn your microphone on before you speak and to turn it off afterwards.

DR. E.T. NAISELE.- Madam Chairperson and honourable Members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, members of the secretariat, ladies and gentlemen, and also wish to acknowledge the presence of the media at the deliberation this morning; thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the Higher Education Commission on the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance or Veitacini Treaty.

(Introduction of officials from Higher Education Commission)

Before I proceed further, I wish to give you an overview of the role of the Commission in as far as this partnership. The Commission is a registered institution by Government, to regulate higher education institutions in Fiji. A total of 56 have now been fully registered, including three universities, moving on to fourth after parliamentary approval a couple of weeks ago. Basically, the work of the Commission is to register all award-conferring higher education institutions and also accredit all the programmes.

We sit at a pivot point where we look after the supply side of the country's education provider, ensuring that training is aligned to the demand of the private sector side of the industry. At that critical juncture, we are placed in a position where we need to ensure that we continue to fulfil the requirements of the industrial private sector side, hence training must be aligned to the industry.

Apart from that, we also do accreditation of the programmes. All 56 higher education institutions will need to go through the proper accreditation programme. We also do foreign qualifications evaluation and assessment. That is basically for our people who are studying overseas, coming to the country to study or for work. Also, foreigners need to get all their qualifications assessed to align to the 10-level qualifications framework at whatever level that may be.

From the perspective of the Higher Education Commission Fiji, this arrangement should not be viewed only through a traditional lens of foreign affairs or defense and security. They also present an important opportunity to invest in what we believe is one of Fiji's greatest strategic assets - the people, our very own people. For the Commission, therefore, the significance of Vuvale Union lies particularly in its potential to strengthen higher education, technical vocational education which is normally called Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), training, digital capabilities, skills development, qualifications, institutional capacity, and the pathways connecting education to employment and national development.

Honourable Members, national security in the modern world is much broader than military security. A country is also secure when it has skills to build and maintain its infrastructure, when it has technicians, engineers, teachers, health professionals and digital specialists, when its institutions can respond to technological change, and when its young people have genuine pathways to produce employment.

A skilled population strengthens economic resilience. A digitally capable population strengthens our ability to participate in the modern economy, and the quality of higher education and TVET system gives Fiji greater capacity to solve its own problems and determine its own future.

The Vuvale Union recognises this connection, its prosperity and people's commitments. It recognises the importance of quality education, economic growth, resilient infrastructure, transition to a digital economy and stronger links between our peoples. From the Commission's perspective, this is significant because it places human capital alongside infrastructure and economic development, so we strongly support that direction.

One of the most promising opportunities arising from the Fiji-Australia relationship is the strengthening of TVET. Through Pacific Skills Australia, Australia and Fiji have already begun a new phase of cooperation in skills development. The opening of a Vuvale Hub at Walu Bay is a practical example of what this partnership can achieve. The Hub provides a shared training environment that can support Fijian training institutions, including institutions that may not themselves possess all the specialised equipment, machinery or facilities required for high-quality practical training.

That is critically important. We should not measure the strength of our TVET systems only by how many institutions we have - we must measure it by quality, relevance, accessibility and training that learners receive. We also measure infrastructure development in towns, in our villages, in cities, and the list goes on. We can also measure it by skilled Fijians working overseas and, at the same time, sending remittances to their loved ones back home.

The proposed development of TVET's Centers of Excellence provides an opportunity to take this further. The Commission sees these Centers of Excellence as potentially becoming national and regional platforms for higher-quality training, modern equipment, training development, industry engagement, innovation and sharing of specialised facilities. They can help Fiji respond to skills shortages in priority sectors and ensure that our training remains connected to emerging technologies' changing industry requirements.

Importantly, these Centers should complement and strengthen existing Fijian higher education institutions rather than duplicate them. Our objective must be to build the capacity of Fiji's education and training system as a whole. The partnership is already moving beyond individual training programmes. Pacific Skills Australia is supporting initiatives connected to broader skills ecosystem, including institutional and programme support, access to the Vuvale Hub, the National Skills Fair and Career Expo, and the development of a National Skills Competition. We hope to have one at the end of November this year.

These initiatives matter because this skills development does not begin and end in the classroom. Young people, Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, need to see the skills, experience the skills and understand where the skills can take them. Career fairs expose students to occupation and industry. Skills competition creates standards of excellence and

gives young tradespeople something to aspire towards. Shared training facilities to improve access to modern equipment. Institutional partnerships strengthen the providers themselves. Together, these institutions can help change the perception of TVET.

For too long, vocational education in many societies has sometimes been viewed as a second chance or second option. We must change that mindset. I am glad that the Minister for Education and the TVET Section of the Ministry of Education is on the final leg of launching of the National TVET Policy.

A qualified electrician, a welder, an automotive technician, a carpenter, a refrigeration specialist or digital technician is not someone who has failed academically - they are skilled professionals whose knowledge is essential to the functioning of the modern economy. They follow through the TVET pathway just like all other TVET providers.

Our very own Fiji National University (FNU) has a dual university system, where they have a TVET system from Certificate Level I up until the Diploma, Degree and PhD level on the TVET side, and also that runs alongside the academia, which is actually for Certificate, Diploma to Degree to PhD level. So, there is provision for both progressing through, and at the same time, to support TVET training. The Vuvale Union, Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, provides an opportunity to elevate that message nationally.

The second area of major importance to the Commission is digital transformation. As outlined under the economic pillar of the Vuvale Union, it identifies support for Fiji's digital transformation as one of the transformative initiatives. For higher education, this cannot simply mean purchasing computers or constructing data centers - digital infrastructure must be matched by digital capability. Fiji will need people who can design, operate, maintain, and protect increasingly sophisticated digital systems. That means developing skills in areas such as cyber security, data analytics, artificial intelligence, cloud technologies, digital systems, software development, and other emerging technologies.

Our higher education institutions will, therefore, need to continuously review programmes, develop new qualifications and micro-credentials, strengthen the digital capability of lecturers and trainers, and work much closer with the industries, as I have alluded to. The curricula are positioned to ensure that programmes that are delivered at higher education institutions align to the needs of industry. This is particularly relevant as the Commission reviews and strengthens Fiji's qualification architecture, to ensure that it remains responsive to technological change, new forms of learning, and changing labour market requirements.

Our goal should not simply be for Fiji to consume technology developed elsewhere - our ambition should be to develop Fijians who can create, manage, adapt and lead technology. The education dimension of the Vuvale relationship also creates important opportunities for student mobility. The proposed arrangement from 2029 under which selected cohorts of Fijian students will be able to access Australian universities under the domestic free arrangement could significantly expand educational opportunities for our very own people here in Fiji.

The Commission welcomes initiatives that reduce barriers to qualify education, and give Fijian students access to specialised programmes, research environment and expertise that may not presently be available locally in Fiji, but we should view this as more than an opportunity for individuals to study overseas. We should become an instrument of national capability development where Fiji has identified critical skills strategies. Overseas study opportunities can be strategically aligned to those needs.

Students can acquire specialised knowledge and return to strengthen our universities, industry, public institutions and communities. This requires coordination between Government, higher education institutions, industry and scholarship agencies so that investment in overseas education contributes directly to Fiji's long-term workforce priorities.

Honourable Members, increased mobility naturally brings another consideration - the potential of loss of skilled people, something that we have been talking about in the past couple of years - losing our people for the workforce outside of Fiji. We should acknowledge that risk, but our response should not be to restrict opportunity. Our response should be to create a system where mobility results in knowledge circulation rather than simply brain drain.

A Fijian who studies or trains in Australia should remain connected to Fiji. There should be opportunities for graduates to return, contribute, conduct research, teach, mentor, establish businesses, transfer technology, or participate in joint projects. The success of Vuvale Education Partnership should, therefore, not only be measured by the number of Fijians who go to Australia - it should also be measured by what knowledge, capability and opportunity come back to our country, Fiji. This is where the mandate of the Higher Education Commission Fiji becomes particularly important. As opportunity expands; quality must remain at the Centre. More training is not automatically better than training, more qualifications are not automatically better qualifications, qualifications must remain credible, relevant and recognised.

Training must meet appropriate standards. Programmes must respond to general labour market needs and learners must be able to move between institutions, qualifications through clear pathways, recognition of prior learning and appropriate credit transfer of arrangement from one institution to another, or moving from one country to another.

The Commission, therefore, sees an important role for itself in supporting implementation through quality assurance and accreditation, strengthen Fiji's qualification system, supporting recognition and portability of qualification, facilitating pathway between TVET and higher education, promoting industrially responsive programme development, supporting micro-credential and emerging forms of learning, strengthening institutional quality and ensuring that new initiatives complement Fiji's national education and workforce priorities. We should also welcome deeper regulator-to-regulator and institution-to-institution cooperation with Australian counterparts in areas such as quality assurance, qualifications recognition, research, digital education, trainer development and emerging technology.

Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, Fiji should also think beyond our national borders. Our geographic position established higher education institutions and regional connection give us an opportunity to become the Pacific hub for skills, qualifications and quality higher education. The Center of Excellence and Research under the partnership should, therefore, not only address Fiji's workforce needs but over time, they should help Fiji provide specialised training for learners from across the Pacific.This would strengthen Fiji's role in regional human capital development while supporting the wider objective of a peaceful, resilient, and prosperous Pacific Pacific. In this sense, education becomes part of the architecture of peace.

When young people have skills, qualifications and employment pathways, communities become more resilient. When countries share knowledge and build institutions together, regional relationships become stronger. When Pacific nations develop their own human capability, we strengthen our collective ability to address the challenges facing our region. The Commission, nevertheless, recognises that the promise of the Vuvale Union will, ultimately, be determined by implementation.

The proposed 10-year Workplan presents an opportunity for sustained cooperation, but implementation should include clear responsibilities, measurable outcomes and regular review. From the higher education and skills perspective, Higher Education Commission would encourage attention to several matters, as follows –

- alignment with Fiji's national qualifications and quality assurance requirement;
- coordination amongst Government agencies, education providers and industry stakeholders;
- sustainable investment in infrastructure and trainer capability;
- mechanism for recognition and portability of qualifications;
- equitable access for women and persons with disabilities and learners outside major urban centres and

- systems to measure whether training is actually producing employment and economic outcomes.

We should not measure success simply by how much funding is committed or how many programmes are launched. We should ask key questions such as:

- Fijians gaining relevant skills;
- employers finding the skills they need;
- our institutions becoming stronger;
- our qualifications internationally credible;
- our young people finding meaningful pathways into employment enterprises; and ultimately
- is Fiji becoming more capable, resilient and self-reliant because of this partnership?

Those should be among our measures of success.

In conclusion, Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, from the perspective of the Commission, we view the education and skills dimension of the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union positively. It gives us an opportunity to strengthen TVET, establish Centre of Excellence, accelerate digital capability, expand our educational pathways, strengthen our institutions and qualifications, deepen cooperations with Australia, and prepare Fiji for a changing world of work. Perhaps, its great opportunity is much simpler - it is an opportunity to invest in people. Building will age, technology will change, industry will evolve, but when we invest in the knowledge, skills, creativity and confidence of our people, those investments continue from one generation to another.

For the Commission, therefore, the Vuvale Union should help us by not simply a workforce for today's vacancies, but a generation of Fijians capable of creating Fiji's future - a future where a young person from Suva, Labasa, Nadi, Savusavu, Kadavu, the tip of Vanua Levu, Udu Point, or even Yasawa-i-Rara, or any part of Fiji for that matter, can see a clear pathway from education to skills, to qualifications, to meaningful employment, and lifelong learning - a future where TVET and higher education work together; a future where our qualifications open doors both, at home and internationally; and a future where Fiji does not simply participate in technological and economical change, but Fiji helps lead in the Pacific. That, Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, is the opportunity we see before us.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- *Vinaka vakalevu* for your very clear presentation and also the opinion of the Commission on the Fiji-Australia-Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance or

Veitacini Treaty. I now open the floor for questions from honourable Members. We have some questions that have been prepared in advance, and I will just give the floor to the honourable Members and see if there are any questions from the members of the public.

HON. A. BIA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, Director, thank you for your thorough presentation. I will just focus on TVET. You have rightfully mentioned in one of your statements that vocational education in many societies, especially in Fiji, it has become second choice. Do you think that it is our education system that has enabled this to become a second choice?

From experience, when you enter secondary school level or high school level, this does not become one of the streams of our education. Why does it become a second choice? Is it because that our system is set up that way? We went from Form 3 to Form 7, just for white collar jobs with the subjects that are taken but after Form 7, if someone does not and cannot go to tertiary, that is why the set up for vocational studies is always the second choice because it is outside the main education system.

My suggestion would be, if you bring it into the mainstream of our education system from Form 3 to Form 7, then it becomes the second choice and that is where identification at an early age comes when you see students who have interests of taking part in carpentry or joinery, or becoming an electrician, rather than bringing it outside as a second choice for students. If you do not do well, then there is vocational training for you. That is my take.

DR. E.T. NAISELE.- Madam Chairperson, yes, a very good comment and question from honourable Bia. That is something that has been in our system, I would say, pre-colonial days and even post-colonial days. Most of us, if not all of us in the room today and all those viewing publicly, we went through this system where our education system prioritised the main academic pathway. At the end of the day, you have to sit an examination. TVET is more aligned to what is called competency-based training where the skillsets are, sort of, tested.

In education, there are three important Hs that are critical. Number one is the education of the head, which is cognitive skills. Second, one is the psychomotor, which is education of hands. This is where TVET comes in and any other protocol. Third one is the affective domain, which is the education of the heart. Apparently, over the years, we seem to focus on number one and number two, the head and the hands. This grounding one is actually from home. If we are not grounded well at home, then it is going to be pretty hard for the schools to be able to take us on board. In our homes, we see in our young days, we see the police officer, the army, the doctors, the nurses, the teachers - these are professions. What do I do to get through this? There is a forum, what I could normally call a Western educational framing, but underpinning there is our indigenous educational frame that we all brought in at our various

home-base level. I guess it is where the churches come in, in underpinning for the attributes, the heart factor.

One space that we are challenged at the higher education level is the third H. So, going back to the TVET, what we have been trying over and working closely right now, the Commission is working with the Ministry of Education TVET Section. So, we are partnering in most of the activities that we have been doing for the last three or four years, like the skills at POE. This next week, we are joining them to go to Fulton to showcase the TVET skills. We are even taking training to the secondary school level and, hopefully, we go down to the primary school level. Right now, we have vocational schools in secondary schools. Also, something that we are piloting at the moment is to take TVET through the main education pathway where a student studying from Year 11, 12 and 13 are also given the opportunity to do National Certificate Level I, Level II and Level III. It is a national qualification that we have.

Right now, one of the prominent schools in Suva, I remember there are a number of students preparing for Year 6 and Year 7 Examinations and, at the same time, for the last two years they have been doing skills training. The Headboy of this school, at the end of this year, will be graduating with a Fiji Seventh Form Examination, also with a National Certificate Level II in Automotive Mechanic. I talked to the young man a couple of weeks ago. He did very well, so this is a model that we hope to shift TVET.

I mentioned about the dual-sector university. Our FNU has that provision, to allow TVET or whoever may have done, perhaps, a Certificate Level II in Welding and Fabrication, or Carpentry, or Baking and Patisserie, or Aircraft Maintenance, to proceed through Certificate level, Diploma Level V and VI, Degree at level VII, and can go right up to PhD level - research in some form of engineering. So, that is the provision that is slowly shipping into our education system. The honourable Minister for Education is well aware of that and is championing also this initiative - shifting TVET and, hopefully, it is going to take away that notion of second option, Madam Chairperson and honourable Members.

HON. A. BIA.- Through you, Madam Chairperson, Director, thank you for that answer because if you look at it, for example, you allowed that to the Headboy of a school in Suva, it also solves unemployment as well because if he does not get that mark to secure a scholarship, he already has a certificate to start somewhere, he can work and pay for his education as well.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you very much, honourable Bia. Any other questions from the Committee Members?

HON. V. LAL.- Madam Chairperson, I would like to thank Dr. Naisele for his presentation. Now, I can see, as per the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union, as a partner, we are

required to upgrade our higher education institutions to meet international standards. My question to you, Sir, is, how will the Higher Education Commission coordinate this?

DR. E.T. NAISELE.- Madam Chairperson, yes, one of the challenges that we have in our 54 registered schools is because TVET is expensive. To deliver TVET, we need equipment and modern equipment, because the industry has shifted. During my day as an Industrial Arts Teacher, I used to teach woodwork carpentry. Now, in the building constructions today, we have prefab materials. Right now, we do not have any of our higher education institutions delivering that package. Electrical cars are coming into Fiji, so I hope I can identify one of the TVET Centers or the three universities delivering TVET.

The coming in of the Vuvale Partnership through Pacific Australia Skills is a benefit, like I have alluded to. They come with support in terms of technical support, finance, et cetera, to help rebuild the relationship of these so-called struggling higher education institutions doing TVET. We are at the juncture in which we will identify the need institution. It could be Montfort Boys Town, who have been around since 1974 under the vision of our former Prime Minister, Ratu Mara, and still very much doing what it was doing.

However, the industry has shifted to another level, and this is where the Vuvale Partnership will come in very handy. A few other smaller institutions that are delivering training at lower level - Certificate Level II, Level III and Level IV, needs to be supported. We will be able to assist in terms of identifying these technical schools by connecting them to this Vuvale Partnership for support and whatever that may be. It can be technical expertise. We have been having a number of meetings with the team from the Pacific Australia Skills in this regard to identify all the institutions that are needed. We have 54, but there are more in terms of the demand for skills TVET training.

You will understand, Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, that the Government also give grants to the Commission for our institutions, for that matter, to help support in terms of their operations. Last year, the Coalition Government gave $95 million and this year, $74.5 million. There are number of criteria that are already given to institutions that are eligible. Unfortunately, most of those that are struggling cannot reach the benchmark to be able to receive some kind of a grant funding for that matter, hence this partnership is important. When they come on board, they will be able to help support in terms of facilities, staff, technical capabilities, equipment facilities, and the list goes on.

HON. V. LAL.- Thank you for the answer, Dr. Naisele. My next question is, by accepting this Treaty, we are to harmonise Fiji's National Qualifications Framework with Australia's tertiary education standards. In doing so, will we not undermine the recognition of local micro-credentials or programmes tailored for specific community needs?

DR. E.T. NAISELE.- Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, Fiji qualifications is guided under the Commission, and the Fiji Qualifications Council is guided by a 10 level qualifications framework. So, Level I to Level IV are Certificates; Level V and Level VI are Diploma; Level VII - Degree; Level VIII - Postgraduate; Level IX - Masters; and Level X - PhD.

All countries in the Pacific region, including Australia and New Zealand, also have 10 level qualifications. So, while we have the country sovereignty, meaning that any country cannot dictate to another country, so Australia cannot dictate to us, or we cannot dictate to Australia. Is our Level IV equating to a Level IV in Australia? They do what is called Qualifications Comparability. It is not equivalent - it is comparable. How comparable is our Diploma in Fitting and Machining to the one in Australia? That is why the technicality of equating, to ensure that the skill level is the same. Our Level IV may be equivalent to their Level III in terms of trade alignment.

In terms of recognition, yes, that is where the framework will talk and that is where our team will get in touch with their national agency in Australia. They used to have State agencies but now, they have just one system. Similar to New Zealand, they have NZQA, especially for TVET. They have the National Universities that look after each university. So, we have relationships in terms of qualifications, recognition, and the shifting of our people in terms of qualifications working here, or those coming over, especially on the Labour Mobility Scheme, et cetera. Madam Chairperson, maybe, Mr. Rawalai may wish to add some more.

MR. E. RAWALAI.- Through you, Madam Chairperson, honourable Lal mentioned undermining micro qualifications. Right now, our Fiji Qualifications Framework does not recognise micro qualifications in Fiji, and we are currently reviewing our Fiji Qualifications Framework to see how best we can recognise micro qualifications. Dr. Naisele might want to add to that.

DR. E.T. NAISELE.-Again, I need to explain micro qualifications to you, Madam Chairperson and honorable Members. You noted that I mentioned in the beginning, we are legislated to register award conferring higher education institutions. The word 'award conferring' is only referring to Certificates Level I to Level IV, Diploma Level V and Level VI. A full award or qualifications Certificate Level I must take a measure of about 400 hours of learning, and this is where the technicality comes, or 40 credit points. So, we have one credit which is equivalent to 10 hours of learning, which is similar to Australia, likewise for New Zealand and most of the countries in the region.

So, award conferring means that we are only legislated under our law, which is now kind of reviewed for regulation, to also take on board the non-awards which are generally called in other countries and also in Fiji, micro-qualifications or micro-credential qualifications that fall

below a Certificate Level I - 39 credits or 390 hours of learning. These are normally called short courses, one day, two days, one week, two weeks. The award duration is about three months and two weeks, so anything less than that is non-award. So, this is where they are given a Certificate of Participation or Certificate of Attendance which, in my interpretation, is just a photo which does not take any value. Unless you add that up to be able to fulfill a qualification - Level I to Level IV, meeting a minimum of 400 hours of learning, then it becomes a tangible qualification that the owner of that paper will be able to take him or her cross from one company to another company within a country, or from one country to another country, for that matter.

HON. V. LAL.- Madam Chairperson, just one more from me; currently we have academic and research partnerships from universities outside Australia as well. This Vuvale Union explicitly talks about Fiji and Australia only. When we accept this Treaty, will this not restrict us from liaising or aligning with other universities outside of Australia?

DR. E.T. NAISELE.- Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, the Vuvale Partnership is now under Pacific Australia Skills. They are now currently going through registration. We also have other universities and other colleges in Australia and New Zealand that are currently delivering courses from Certificate, Diploma to Degree level, so it does not stop.

To answer your question, honourable Lal, yes, it does not affect that agreement, especially in terms of research, where we need to open this up because for the higher education space, we now have established the Research Council under the Ministry of Education, under the legislature of the Minister and the Permanent Secretary. That is something that we would love to push at the higher education sector, particularly universities, to engage more and encourage more research, hence the partnership.

This partnership will also facilitate other universities within Australia. So, Hub is the front face of the other universities at the back of this partnership. Definitely, yes, they will facilitate and it gives that provision. If they want to register separately, or if they want to come through this partnership, then they are also welcomed to come on board. Thank you, Madam Chairperson.

HON. A. BIA.- Madam Chairperson, I just wanted to follow up on the micro qualifications. That is why a lot of micro qualification programmes are going on in rural communities and villages, they are just have certificates of participation.

DR. E.T. NAISELE.- Madam Chairperson, I just want to clarify what honourable Bia has mentioned. Yes, this is something that we are also looking seriously into. We are now developing a policy called Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and also Recognition of Current

Competencies, especially for our people in the *vanua,* in villages. How can we convert some of those to elevate that and to recognise that, that is a qualification?

So, RPL actually allows a system and, hopefully, we can launch this next year or in the middle of next year, where external evaluators and assessors go straight to whoever applied. If he or she is a carpenter in the village or if someone is weaving a mat or any form of trade, the evaluator will go and evaluate that particular applicant. There are some boxes to be ticked in terms of whether competent or not yet competent - not pass or fail, this one is competence-based training - competent or not yet competent.

If there is a gap in there, then we might recommend and ask TSLS to support, to take him or her maybe to Polytech or to FNU or to USP, for skills gap training, before he or she can be given an award. So, it speeds up, so he or she does not have to go and spend one year or three years at a university or technical institute for that matter. That is also something that we hope, in the next couple of years, we will be able to capitalise on - help identify the skills within our local community.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you very much, Dr. Naisele. Thank you, honourable Members. I have a question on cross-border student and academic mobility, Dr. Naisele and Mr. Rawalai. Article 3(7) of the Treaty commits the parties to deepen people linkages by strengthening border management systems and enhancing mobility settings. Will this lead to any streamlined visa processes and reciprocal work study rights for Fijian academics and postgraduate researchers in Australia? What role do you think the Commission will play in regulating cross-border credit transfers?

DR. E.T. NAISELE.- Madam Chairperson, cross-border is something that is not only happening within Fiji, but right across the globe. We have national agencies within countries. For us here in Fiji, we are 16 years old. In the Pacific, Samoa is heading. The Samoa Qualification Authority (SQA) is 20 years old and then Vanuatu - Vanuatu Qualification Authority (VQA), we have Solomon Islands Tertiary Education and Skills Authority (SITESA) in the Solomons. We have Tonga National Qualification and Accreditation Board (TNQAB) in Tonga. So, we talk at our level.

If there are people from here who want to work within the sustainable development of this country, that is alright for them coming to us and also Australia and New Zealand. Then we have what you call Sub-Regional Framework as well. We have in the Pacific, under SPC, the Educational Quality and Assessment Programme (EQAP), which is the regional agency for accrediting regional qualifications in which they hold a meta framework where the national agencies below the regional agency under SPC, look after their national systems. So, when we

accredited programmes, it goes through to them. So, the other region can see whichever programmes are offered in universities in Fiji where they can also request to take up, et cetera.

Other than that, we have what we call the Sub-Regional Framework where we link up to other sub-regions in Asia. They have Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), in the Caribbean they have the CARICOM, the Caribbean Community, so these are all subregional. We have our own network where we connect and we talk. If someone wants to go and work in the Caribbean or maybe in Europe, we can check under the Lisbon Convention, the European system, and then we can identify the qualification from here that facilitates that qualification across the board.

I want to thank the Parliament a couple of years ago where Fiji ratified the Tokyo Convention. That is a very powerful document because it gives that leverage for Fijians in terms of mobility. There are two things, in terms of further studies and work, and in countries within the Asia/Pacific region.

I mentioned also recognition of qualifications, so any foreigner outside or within the Asia/ Pacific region coming into Fiji, we do evaluation process of qualification. Through the Tokyo Convention, it facilitates that process which normally takes about three to four months. Now, it can take, perhaps, less than a day, to be able to do recognition of qualifications. I hope I have answered your question. Maybe Mr. Rawalai might want to add a little bit more on that.

MR. E. RAWALAI.- Madam Chairperson, just for the information of the Committee, the Higher Education Commission Fiji and the Ministry of Immigration have just drafted an MOU so that we can look at the issue and one of the major issues is on students' cross-border.

HON. V. LAL.- Madam Chairperson, reading the Veitacini Treaty, in the Preamble, it states that the democratic States safeguard their freedom and sovereignty. How will the Higher Education Commission ensure that national security studies, defense research and academic publications in Fiji universities remain free from political interference, censorship or security vetting by foreign military partners?

DR. E.T. NAISELE.- Yes, I hope that what I have said in my first statement regarding security, et cetera, because education must be, sort of, a conduit to be able to facilitate our people's movement from point A to point B, either for education or also for work. If I can get your question correctly, I guess, in terms of where we stand as the Commission and regulator of higher education institutions, and how we facilitate the movement of our people in whatever that may be, whether it is local or those from overseas coming in or our students going

across, it is critical to understand that education is still very much a supreme and an underpinning thing in whatever they do.

Any other underpinning that falls behind that, we may need to relook at that again, but our law is just simply confined within the ambits of education and training, and the world has shifted on how best we can continue to play this game in which we are regulated under the Higher Education Promulgation 2008 - almost 16 years ago. The landscape has really changed.

Considering security and other key issues, now that drugs is coming in big time, how can the Commission be able to help support our police officers to combat this problem because it is mainly affecting our young people which most of them are at university level stage. It is something that we hope to continue to think about on how best we can continue to work together with other departments. The Commissioner alone may not be able to handle this, Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, so it is how best we can work together with the Police, the Military and others, maybe Immigration for that matter, to fight all other key issues that are coming into our country.

We have a National Research Council. I can probably get Mr. Rawalai to speak about that.

MR. E. RAWALAI.- Through you, Madam Chairperson, honourable Lal mentioned research and that is something that comes under the Ministry of Education, but we are working together to support that. The setup of the National Research Council will specifically look at research in the country.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you, Sir, and maybe as a lead on to that, I wanted to talk about Fiji's sovereignty, and a lot of interests has been about that. On Fiji's sovereignty, I want to ask a question in terms of educational partnerships because Article 4(2)(b) requires the parties to engage third parties in their critical infrastructure, technology and security sectors in a manner that honors the Pacific Way and protects and strengthens the parties in the Pacific region's individual and collective security.

How would this restrict the Commission's ability to approve academic or research partnerships between Fijian universities and non-Western international institutions, in particular, when we are talking about high-tech EV technicians, cyber or scientific fields? What if a university or an institution, for example, from China or from another Eastern Bloc country, want to come into Fiji to offer courses, would that restrict the Higher Education Commission's ability to approve academic or research partnerships between Fiji and non-Western institutions?

DR. E.T. RAISELE.- Madam Chairperson, yes. As I have mentioned, some of the developing areas that are, sort of, coming through in terms of how can we, as a country, and also in the space of our education, protect what we do and for the people coming from abroad to come and do whatever we do in the area of research.

I understand there has been research under the Research Council. All those coming in have to be identified because of what had happened in the past where people just come in and I would say, poach what were rightly ours and make a name. Not only that, the financial benefits of publication, et cetera, for that matter. The Research Council is under the Ministry and under the Government, and I am glad that the Government is slowly scrutinising that, to ensure that people go through proper procedure or protocol.

For us, we are also engaged in that, to ensure that they come in through the proper protocols before they are given that leeway to be able to conduct research. There have been numerous publications that are written in Fiji by foreign authors but, definitely, they are not authors of the information. The owners of the information are actually the wisdom holders of the people, of the *vanua*, and this is something that challenges our space also.

How can we correct that? One of the things that we have been encouraging our faculty and some members of universities is to safeguard this, particularly, if there is anyone who wants to come directly, they need to be redirected to us so that we can give them proper guidance of what they need to do.

There are stringent and very strict measures in place to ensure that whatever we value that ours are protected. There are certain laws that they need to go through, that they are bound by and they also need to be strictly followed. First of all, there is the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs. If they want to do some research in the village, then for that they have to go through the approval of the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, with our support as well and the Ministry of Education's support, if it has to do with education. If it has to do with indigenous research, then our Ministry of iTaukei Affairs need to come on board. These are some of the things that we are watchful and mindful of. Our world is actually opening up for these types of challenges that are coming through. We are trying to put things in different hubs so that we can help approach them in a better way.

MR. E. RAWALAI.- Madam Chairperson, just to add on, I think through the Vuvale Union and you talked about sovereignty, we should be ensuring that Australian-supported training remains aligned with Fiji's qualifications and quality assurance systems. There needs to be clear coordination with Fiji's existing regulatory and qualifications arrangements. Programmes delivered through these initiatives should meet appropriate National Quality Standards,

respond to Fiji's labor market priorities, and avoid unnecessary duplication of programmes and infrastructure already available in

Fiji.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- I have another question about educational digitalization. One of the Articles states that the transition to a digital economy requires safe and secure digital infrastructure and systems. As our higher education institutions transition to more online learning, digital repositories and shared research databases, how can the Commission enforce to protect the intellectual property and private records of local academic institutions and students from external cyber threats or foreign surveillance?

DR. E.T. RAISELE.- Yes, again, the world has shifted and 'AI' is very much the buzzword. We are even challenged with how our 54 registered institutions take those on board. Those are the pros and the cons. With digital tools coming on board, there are some check systems that are currently happening that the universities do have and are no longer performing that function in terms of the checks - the credibility of a paper, of research or a thesis submission for that matter. There is even AI helping the students to complete projects and research papers. Our current engagement with the three universities is still challenged with how best they can address the notion of digitization.

Even at this point in time, they are doing one-on-one. Any researcher or any student submitting a thesis or a paper, they would know the intellectual capability of that person. If there is a big gap in difference in terms of what has been submitted and the general understanding of the lecturer or faculty staff members or supervisor for that matter, then there must be a suspect of forgery, so it is big time. Right now, we are getting an AI expert to help work with our investors to help identify ways in which we address digital systems that are coming on board, assisting students to complete projects but not really their own works, but actually supported work using technology.

We are putting in our Strategic Plan how best we can move it on for the next five years and coming up with a better solution to address this. We are working closely and we have reestablished our Vice-Chancellor's Forum, particularly, for the three Universities on how best they can talk among themselves and advise the Commission and come up with a solution to help solve the problem amongst themselves at the higher level. This is actually happening at the higher level from Masters, Research and PhD level research.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you, Dr. Naisele. Honourable Members, I know we are quickly running out of time. In fact, we have reached the limit of our public submission at this moment. So, if there are no other questions from honourable Members, it just leaves me to

say thank you very much, Dr. Naisele and Mr. Rawalai, for a very open discussion today. Thank you for being able to answer some of our questions. We still have more questions, and I hope that you will give us some more time in case we have some written questions to send to you.

I want to thank everyone present today and also the members of the media and members of the public who, I know and as you have seen, are very interested in these two Treaties. So, thank you very much and I declare this meeting closed.

The Committee adjourned at 10.59 a.m.

Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management

FIJI GOVERNMENT

MINISTRY OF RURAL, MARITIME DEVELOPMENT AND DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT

PUBLIC SUBMISSION

TO THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

RE: FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION AND OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE ('VEITACINI TREATY')

Date of Hearing	Friday, 25 September 2026, 9:15 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.
Venue	Big Committee Room 2, Parliament Complex
Presented by	Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Rural, Maritime Development and Disaster Risk Management (MRMDDRM), supported by A/DS and DDM.
Reference	Parl 7/05 – Standing Order 130

OPENING STATEMENT

- Madam Chairperson, Honourable Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you and to contribute the perspective of the Ministry of Rural, Maritime Development and Disaster Risk Management (MRMDDRM) to your review of the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance ('Veitacini Treaty').

- The Ministry welcomes both instruments as a strengthening of a partnership that has stood the test of the most difficult moments in Fiji's recent history, including Category 5 Tropical Cyclones Winston and Yasa and the COVID-19 pandemic.

- As requested, this submission focuses on the provisions and proposed areas of cooperation that fall within the Ministry's mandate for rural and maritime development, and disaster risk management.

(a) The Ministry's Role and Involvement in the Development and Proposed Implementation of the Treaties

- The Ministry has been part of the consultation effort since 2025 through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in terms of improving coordination and implementation of programmes under the Vuvale Partnership.

- The Ministry, through the National Disaster Risk Management Office (NDRMO), is Fiji's lead agency for disaster preparedness, response and recovery, and has been directly involved in the Fiji-Australia disaster resilience partnership that underpins much of the practical cooperation the two Treaties.

- As the Vuvale Union and Veitacini Treaty move into implementation, the Ministry anticipates a continuing role as a coordinator and technical contributor to the Vuvale Bukmak on matters of disaster resilience, rural infrastructure and maritime safety, as well as an implementing and coordinating agency under the proposed 10-Year Work Plan.

- The Ministry's existing sub-national governance structure is also directly relevant to implementation. Through our District and Advisory Councils (DAC) management function, the Ministry currently partners with 302 Councillors serving 894 constituencies and we works alongside the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs to facilitate and provide advisory support to the Bose ni Tikina and Bose ni Yasana development forums.

- These existing structures give the Ministry a ready-made platform for community-level consultation, awareness and coordination as the Treaties and the associated 10-Year Work Plan are rolled out, and the Ministry recommends that the Committee formally recognise these existing sub-national coordination mechanisms as a foundation for implementation, rather than requiring new parallel structures.

(b) Key Provisions Relating Directly to the Ministry's Mandate and Responsibilities

a. **Vuvale Union, Article 2 (Vuvale Union, Part 2):** aligns closely with the Ministry's relocation and disaster risk management responsibilities, and with the resilience and prosperity objectives that already sit at the core of the Ministry's nine rural development programs.

b. **Vuvale Union, Article 3 (Prosperity and People):** commits the Parties to deepen economic and human development partnership, including resilient infrastructure, rules-based trade and investment, and the transition to a digital economy – directly relevant to the Ministry's rural connectivity and rural economic transformation objectives.

c. **Vuvale Union, Article 4 (Climate and Peace):** commits the Parties to support adaptation and mobility with dignity for Pacific peoples, and to protect critical infrastructure – highly relevant to the Ministry's relocation and disaster risk management responsibilities and to rural and maritime infrastructure.

- However, the Ministry respectfully draws the Committee's attention to a significant gap: while both Treaties speak extensively to climate change and resilience (Vuvale Union Articles 2 and 4; Veitacini Treaty preamble), **neither instrument makes specific mention of 'disasters' in any form**.

- This omission will certainly narrowing a critical avenue of cooperation that has been built and strengthened over many years, and limiting collaboration to climate-related hazards only, when Fiji and Australia also stand to benefit from cooperation on tsunamis, earthquakes, oil spills and other non-climate hazards.

(c) Existing and Proposed Areas of Fiji-Australia Cooperation within the Ministry's Portfolio

The Ministry's partnership with Australia already gives practical effect to much of what the Treaties now seek to formalise:

- The FJ$7 million Disaster Resilience Program (2025–2029), delivering disaster logistics, community preparedness and technical assistance on disaster risk management;

- The FJ$35 million Fiji Climate Adaptation Project, delivering structural and non-structural interventions in Nadi to protect the town and surrounding economic activity;
- Proposed areas of intervention include:

  ○ multi-hazard disaster risk reduction; ○ early warning and last-mile communications; ○ disaster preparedness and response capability; ○ humanitarian logistics; ○ emergency telecommunications; ○ climate and disaster-resilient infrastructure; ○ rural water and community infrastructure; ○ resilient housing; ○ risk-informed development planning; ○ rural and maritime connectivity; ○ digital connectivity; ○ community livelihood resilience; ○ climate adaptation and relocation; ○ data and geospatial capability; ○ capacity development for divisional, provincial and district officials; and ○ institutional strengthening.

- These areas are consistent with the Vuvale Union's commitments to prosperity, resilience, climate security, infrastructure and digital transformation.

(d) The Ministry's Responsibilities under the Proposed 10-Year Work Plan

- The Ministry recommends that a dedicated Disaster Resilience, Early Warning and HADR (Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response) chapter be adopted as a binding pillar of the 10-Year Work Plan overseen by the Vuvale Bukmak under Article 7(4) of the Vuvale Union.
- Key initiatives the Ministry would expect to lead or co-lead include - Implementation of the new National Rural Development Policy (NRDP) 2027–2036, whose policy goal, will emphasising on rural development governance reform and rural economic transformation, expected to roll out over three Horizons of Change across the 10-year period. This will represent the most significant change to Fiji's rural development system since its initiation in 1875, following prior institutional interventions in 1945, 1969 and 2009;

- Also, the need to include disaster-proofing and 'Build Back Better' standards applied to jointly funded rural and maritime infrastructure; and

(e) Anticipated Benefits and Opportunities for Fiji within the Ministry's Sector

- Faster, better-coordinated disaster response, including quicker deployment of military and humanitarian assistance, improved logistics support to outer islands, and better emergency communications;
- Improved climate-resilient community infrastructure, including rural water systems and coastal protection works;
- Increased skills training and employment opportunities in engineering, construction, maritime security and disaster management, together with youth leadership and scholarship opportunities;
- Protection of rural livelihoods dependent on agriculture, fisheries, forestry and tourism, through the market, transport and investment stability that regional peace and security support; and
- Stronger maritime and fisheries protection, including combating illegal fishing, enhanced surveillance of Fiji's Exclusive Economic Zone, and monitoring of transnational crime and trafficking.

(f) Legislative, Policy, Regulatory, Institutional or Administrative Requirements

- Bilateral implementing arrangements under Veitacini Treaty Article 7 (Visiting Forces) must explicitly define civilian-led disaster response protocols, clarifying that the ADF usually operates in support of the NDRMO and the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF), and still respecting NDRMO national disaster management coordination under the NDMA Act 2024;
- The need for pre-agreed customs waivers, airspace clearances and emergency relief supply protocols to fast-track humanitarian corridors, complementing the border management provisions in Vuvale Union Article 3(7); and

- The need for support towards institutional transition arrangements in supporting the Ministry's machinery-of-government changes under the NRDP, including coordination with the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and the Ministry of Multi-ethnic Affairs.

(g) Financial, Staffing, Infrastructure, Capacity-Building or Other Resource Implications

- The request for Direct Australian contributions to existing Trust Funds for Disaster and Climate Relocation;

- The request for long-term, predictable Australian budget support for the phased, threewave rollout of the NRDP over 10 years; and

- The need for staffing and technical capacity for the Ministry and the NDRMO to better coordinate an expanded scope of bilateral engagement implementation.

(h) Key Issues, Risks or Challenges for the Committee's Consideration

- Both Treaties reference the wider climate and resilience conversation (Vuvale Union Articles 2 and 4) but make no specific mention of disasters in any form. This omission jeopardises a critical expression and avenue of cooperation that has been established and strengthened over the years, and confines potential collaboration to climate-related hazards, excluding other critical risks such as tsunamis, earthquakes and oil spills;

- The absent of an explicit civilian-led protocols, under Visiting Forces arrangements under Article 7 of the Veitacini Treaty risk defaulting to a security/defence framing, when in Fiji, Australian military forces are in practice most frequently deployed for disaster relief, in support of and coordinated by the NDRMO and RFMF. We therefore recommend that the Committee ensure Visiting Forces arrangements explicitly define civilian-led disaster response protocols – clarifying that the ADF operates in support of the NDRMO and RFMF, respecting NDRMO national disaster management coordination under the NDMA 2024;

- The Vuvale Union Article 3(7) addresses border management but is silent on humanitarian corridors, risking delay to emergency relief during disaster response. We recommend that bilateral implementing arrangements include pre-agreed customs waivers, airspace clearances, and emergency relief supply protocols so that relief is never delayed during disaster times; and

- Vuvale Union Article 4(5–6) protects critical infrastructure primarily against geostrategic or cyber threats. However, we wish to highlight that natural hazards cause more frequent physical devastation to Fijian infrastructure than armed conflict, and we recommend incorporating 'Build Back Better' and disaster-proofing standards into joint infrastructure investments.

Conclusion

- Madam Chairperson, the Ministry views the Vuvale Union and the Veitacini Treaty as a welcome, enduring expression of a partnership that Fiji's rural and maritime communities already rely on in their most difficult moments.
- Addressing the gap around disasters, and formalising the civil-military and humanitarian-corridor arrangements set out above, will ensure the Treaties fully reflect the reality of how this cooperation delivers for Fiji. The Ministry thanks the Committee and stands ready to assist with any further technical information it may require.

[VERBATIM REPORT]

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

UNION/TREATY

(1) FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION
(2) OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE (VEITACINI TREATY)

ENTITY: Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management

VENUE: Big Committee Room 2 (East Wing)

DATE: Friday, 25th September, 2026

VERBATIM REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE HELD AT THE BIG COMMITTEE ROOM (EAST WING), GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, ON FRIDAY , 25TH SEPTEMBER, 2026, AT 9.15 A.M.

Present

Hon. L.S. Qereqeretabua	-	Chairperson
Hon. R.R. Sharma	-	Deputy Chairperson
Hon. V. Lal	-	Member
Hon. T.R. Matasawalevu	-	Alternate Member

Apologies

Hon. P.K. Ravunawa	-	Member
Hon. I. Tuiwailevu	-	Member

Submittee: Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management

In Attendance

(1)	Mr. Mitieli Cama	-	Permanent Secretary
(2)	Mr. Josefa Navuku	-	Acting Deputy Secretary
(3)	Mr. Napolioni Nabuliwaqa	-	Director, Disaster Management

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Honourable Members and representatives from the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management, members of the media and the public, ni *sa bula vinaka*. It is my pleasure to welcome everyone present in the room, as well as those joining us live via broadcast.

I wish to advise that pursuant to the Standing Orders of Parliament, specifically Standing Order 111, all Committee meetings are open to the public and the media, so this submission will be open to the public and the media. If there is any sensitive information relating to this submission that cannot be disclosed publicly, this information can be provided to the Committee either in writing or in a closed session. However, this will only be permitted in limited circumstances, including matters relating to national security, third party confidential

information, personnel or human resource matters, and also during the Committee's own deliberation as we formulate our report back to Parliament.

I want to remind everyone that comments and questions should be directed through the Chair. For viewers following this meeting live on *Facebook*, questions can be submitted via the comment section, but note that only relevant questions will be considered by the Secretariat and the Committee. Members of the Committee may stop you to interject during your presentation, or we will wait until the end to raise questions.

I remind all those present that this is a parliamentary proceeding and all information provided is protected under the Parliamentary Powers and Privileges Act and the Standing Orders of Parliament. No slander or libel will be condoned and all information presented to the Committee should be factual. For meeting protocols, because we have cameras, we ask that movement in this room be kept to a minimum. I also ask everyone to, please, switch your mobile phones to silent mode.

I want to introduce the Members of the Committee and also our Secretariat to you. (Introduction of Committee Members and Secretariat)

Honourable Members, members of the media and the public, the Committee will receive an in-person submission from the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management in relation to the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance or Veitacini Treaty, currently before the Committee. I now invite the representatives present today to introduce yourselves and to proceed with your submission. Please, remember to turn your microphones on before you speak and turn them off after speaking.

MR. M. CAMA.- Honourable Members of the committee, first of all, thank you so much for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am here as the Permanent Secretary of the Minister of Rural and Maritime Department in Disaster Risk Management, and I am here with our Deputy Secretary, Mr. Josefa Navuka; and Director Disaster Management, Mr. Napolioni Nabuliwaqa. We are privileged today to contribute via our Ministry's perspective on the two Instruments - the FijiAustralia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance or Veitacini Treaty.

Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, let me begin by saying plainly that the Ministry welcomes both Instruments. They represent a strengthening of a partnership that has stood the test of the most difficult moments in Fiji's recent history, including Category 5 *TC Winston*, *TC Yasa*, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. Those were moments when our rural and maritime communities depended on exactly the kind of bilateral cooperation these

Treaties now seek to formalise and that lived experience inform everything I will say this morning.

As requested by the Committee, my submission will focus specifically on the provisions and proposed areas of cooperation that fall within our Ministry's mandate, which is rural and maritime development and disaster risk management. I will structure my remarks around four areas –

(1) Ministry's role in developing and implementing the Treaties.
(2) The key provisions that speak directly to our mandate and one significant gap that we have identified.
(3) The practical cooperation already underway with Australia and what it tells us about the road ahead.
(4) The resourcing and institutional questions the Committee should consider.

So, throughout, I have tried to keep my remarks grounded in what our Ministry actually delivers on the ground, in our Provinces and along our coastlines, rather than in the language of the Treaties alone.

In terms of our Ministry's role, the Ministry has been part of the consultation effort since 2025, working with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to improve coordination and implementation of programmes under the Vuvale Partnership.

Through the National Disaster Risk Management Office (NDRMO), we are Fiji's lead agency for disaster preparedness, response and recovery, and we have been directly involved in the FijiAustralia Disaster Resilience Partnership that underpins much of the practical co-operations these two Treaties now seek to formalise.

As the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and Veitacini Treaty move into implementation, we anticipate our continuing role as coordinator and technical contributor to the Vuvale Bukmak on matters of disaster resilience, rural infrastructure and maritime safety, as well as the implementing and coordinating agency under the proposed 10-year Workplan, as we noted in the Analysis.

I want to draw the Committee's attention to the structural assets we already have in place because it bears directly on how quickly and how credible these Treaties can be implemented on the ground. Through our District and Advisory Council management functions, the Ministry currently partners with around 302 councillors who are serving 894 constituencies. We work alongside the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs to support the Bose ni Tikina and Bose ni Yasana development forums. These are not new or proposed structures; they are already functioning networks and already reach into every province and district in the country. So, they also give us a ready-made platform for community level consultations, awareness and coordination, as the treaty and the 10-year Workplan are ready to be rolled out.

Our recommendation to the Committee, therefore, is that these existing sub-national coordination mechanisms be formally recognised as the foundation for implementation rather than setting up a new parallel structure that can take years to build the trust these already have.

In terms of the key provisions and gap we have identified, three provisions of the Vuvale Union speak directly to our mandate. Article 2 aligns closely with the Ministry's relocation and disaster risk management responsibilities, and with the resilience and prosperity objectives that already sit at the core of our nine Rural Development Programmes within the Ministry.

In Article 3 - Prosperity and People, this Article commits both parties to deepening economic and human development partnership, resilient infrastructure, rules-based trade and investment, and the transition to digital economy, which is directly relevant to our rural connectivity and rural transformation objectives.

Article 4 - Climate and Peace commits the parties to support adaptation and mobility with dignity for Pacific peoples and to protect critical infrastructure, which is highly relevant to our relocation and disaster risk responsibilities and to rural and maritime infrastructure more broadly.

However, Madam Chairperson, I must respectively draw the Committee's attention to a significant gap. While both treaties speak extensively on climate change and resilience, in Article 2 and Article 4 of the Vuvale Union, in the preamble of the Veitacini Treaty, neither Instrument makes specific mention of disasters in any form. This is not a drafting technicality.

Fiji's disaster risk profile is not limited to climate-related hazards alone, we face tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanic activity and made-made disasters, such as oil spills, none of which are captured in the climate framing alone. So, this omission narrows a critical avenue of cooperation that has been built and strengthened over many years, and it risks limiting collaboration to climate-related hazards only, when Fiji and Australia also tend to benefit from deeper cooperation

on these other hazards. This is the first and the most important recommendation I bring to the Committee's attention this morning, and I would like to ask if it can be clearly reflected in the Committee's Report.

In terms of cooperation that is already underway, the Ministry's existing partnership with Australia already gives practical effect to much of what these Treaties now seek to formalise. We currently deliver the $7 million Disaster Resilient Programme, running from 2025 to 2029, which provides disaster logistics, community preparedness and technical assistance on disaster risk management. We are also partnering in the $35 million Fiji Climate Adaptation Project, which is expected to deliver structural and non-structural intervention in the Nadi areas to protect the town and surrounding economic activities.

Building on this foundation, we see proposed areas of intervention across – multi-hazards disaster risk reduction; early warning and last mile communications; disaster preparedness and response capability; humanitarian logistics; emergency telecommunications; climate and disaster resilient infrastructure; rural water and community infrastructure; Rural Resilient Housing; Risk Informed Development Planning; Rural and Maritime Connectivity; Digital Connectivity;

Community Livelihood Resilience; Climate Adaptation and Relocation; Data and Geospatial Capability; Capacity Development for Divisional, Provincial and District Officials; and Institutional Strengthening. Each of these areas is consistent with the Vuvale Union's own commitments to prosperity, resilience, climate security, infrastructure and digital transformation.

In terms of the 10-year Work plan and what it means for the Ministry, we recommend that a dedicated disaster resilience, early warning and humanitarian assistance and disaster response chapter be adopted as a binding pillar of the 10-year Workplan, overseen by the Vuvale Bukmak under Article 7(4) of the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union. Within that Workplan, our Ministry expects to lead and co-lead two streams of work. The first is the implementation of the new National Rural Development Policy 2027-2036, which is currently now in the finalisation stage, whose policy goal emphasizes more towards rural development, governance reform and rural economic transformation. This policy is expected to roll out over three horizons of change across a 10-year period. So, I want the Committee to appreciate the scale of this revised policy, as it represents the most significant change to Fiji's rural development system since it was established in 1875, following prior institutional intervention and adjustment in 1945, 1969, and recently, in 2009.

The second is the application of Disaster Proofing and Build Back Better (BBB) standards, to all jointly fund rural and maritime infrastructure.

In terms of anticipated benefits for Fiji's rural and maritime communities, we anticipate faster, better coordination in disaster response, including quicker deployment of military and humanitarian assistance, improved logistics support for our outer islands, and better emergency communication when they matter most.

We also anticipate improved climate resilient community infrastructure, including rural water systems and coastal protection works, delivered to a higher and more consistent standard than has sometimes been possible in the past. We also expect to increase skills training and employment opportunities in engineering, construction, maritime security, and disaster management, alongside our youth leadership and scholarship opportunities, that will build a generation of Fijians equipped to lead this work by themselves.

We also expect protection of rural livelihood dependent on agriculture, fisheries, forestry and tourism through market transport and investment stability that regional peace and security will support. As we anticipate stronger maritime and fisheries protection, including combating illegal fishing, enhance surveillance of Fiji's EEZ, and monitoring of transnational crime and trafficking, all of which matters enormously to the coastal and maritime communities this Ministry serves.

In terms of legislative and institutional resources in consideration, Madam Chairperson, I turn now to four matters we believe the Committee should weigh carefully, as it finalizes its Report. Each of these arises directly from our Ministry's operational experience, and each, in our view, is capable of being resolved through implementing arrangements that will follow ratification rather than require amendment of the Treaty text itself:

(1) Bilateral implementation arrangement under Article 7 of the Veitacini Treaty when dealing with visiting forces must explicitly define civilian-led disaster response protocols. It is essential to clarify that the Australian Defense Force operates in support of the NDRMO and the RFMF, and that this continues to respect the NDRMO' National Disaster Management Coordination's role under the National Disaster Management Act 2024. Without this clarity, visiting forces arrangement risk defaulting to security or defense training. When in Fiji, the Australian Military Forces are in practice, most frequently deployed for disaster relief and in support of and coordinated by NDRMO and RFMF.

(2) On humanitarian corridors, under the Vuvale Union, Article 3(7) addresses broader management, but it is silent on humanitarian corridors specifically. We recommend preagreed custom waivers, airspace clearances and emergency relief protocols to be built into bilateral implementation arrangements so that relief assistance is never delayed during a disaster response.

(3) On infrastructure protection, under the Vuvale Union, Article 4(5) and (6) through the protection of critical infrastructure primarily against dual strategic or cyber threats, we wish to highlight that natural hazards cause far more frequent fiscal devastation to Fiji infrastructure than armed conflicts. We recommend that BBB and disaster proving standards be incorporated in all joint infrastructure investment as a matter of course, not just an afterthought.

(4) On institutional transition, we will also need support for the Ministry or Government, as we expect changes that will accompany the implementation of the National Rural Development Policy, including close coordination with the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs.

On resourcing, three requests follow directly from the above.

(1) We request direct Australian contribution to the existing Trust Fund for Disaster and Climate Relocation. Right now, our current Trust Fund is purely Government contribution annually. So, we suggest if the Australian Government can also play a part in contributing to that Trust Fund.

(2) In terms of the Trust Fund for Disaster and Climate Relocation, we request long term predictable Australian budget support for Phase 3 wave rollout of the National Rural Development Policy over a 10-year horizon.

(3) We will need additional staffing and technical capacity both within the Ministry and within NDRMO, to coordinate what will be considerably expanded scope of bilateral engagement going forward.

In conclusion, Madam Chairperson, the Ministry views that the Vuvale Union and the Veitacini Treaty is a welcome and enduring expression of partnership that features rural and maritime communities already relying in their most difficult moments.

Our recommendations this morning are offered in that spirit, addressing the gap around disasters and formalising the civil, military and humanitarian corridor arrangements I have outlined earlier. This will ensure that the Treaties fully reflect the reality of how this cooperation already delivers in Fiji, and how it can deliver even more in the years ahead.

The Ministry thanks the Committee for its time this morning. We stand ready to assist with any further technical information the Committee may require, whether after this briefing or in writing, following this meeting. Thank you, Madam Chairperson and honourable Members.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you very much, Permanent Secretary, for the very considered presentation. In particular, I am very appreciative of the recommendations and also the fact that you have highlighted the gaps that you think require a filling.

At this time, I will open the floor to the Committee Members for any questions or comments.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, how well was your Ministry consulted in the formalisation of this Treaty?

MR. M. CAMA.- Yes, I will try to comment and then Director, Disaster Management can also contribute. As already mentioned, most of the consultations that we had with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was focussing on the Vuvale Partnership. From my understanding, we are not really contributing to the actual text of the Treaty, we were more focusing on the discussion and coordination on the current Vuvale Partnership prior to it being elevated to be a treaty. That is why when we go through the Treaty, we then picked up some of the areas that really needs to be considered.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Sir, you said there is a Workplan. Where is the Workplan?

MR. M. CAMA.- Through you, Madam Chairperson, I think we picked this comment based on the additional document that was submitted to us to be part of our submission. That is where we picked up that Workplan. We then assumed that there is a workplan already in place, even though we did not accept, but we have noted in the analysis that was submitted to us to prepare our submission.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- That is well noted. So, you mentioned about bilateral cooperation and the Fiji Climate Adaptation Fund programme - $35 million allocation, Disaster Resilience Programme - $7 million and now the Vuvale Workplan for 10 years. In terms of accountability and rather visibility of foreign aid for our rural and maritime, I would say it lacks visibility. Why do we not see this foreign aid, filling in the gaps where it needs to be or can you explain that?

MR. N. NABULIWAQA.- Thank you, honourable Member. Madam Chairperson, through you, the programmes in which the Australian Government is assisting Fiji do have their own media awareness in the programmes that they have in place. In all the sites in which we have been assisted by Australia, there is visibility of Australia's contributions to the disaster resilience base.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, let us say climate adaptation programme - $35 million coming into Fiji. Then there is a Prime Minister's National Disaster Relief and Rehabilitation Fund. So, what part does your Ministry play in terms of negotiating for the approval of these funds? You can mention the other stakeholder or Ministry that you would negotiate these funds with and explain to the Committee and probably the general public, how these funds are channeled down to solve the issues that we have before us. Does it go to the Prime Minister's Fund? Does it go to the Ministry? Who has approval? Please, enlighten the Committee and the wider public audience.

MR. M. CAMA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, maybe I can further add to the previous comment by the Director in terms of some of the donor funded programmes.

Most of this donor funded programmes, we are just playing that coordinating role. So, most of the implementation is being done by other line Ministries and majority of the implementation that we have done internally is in terms of community preparedness. That is when we conduct this awareness and training in terms of community preparedness towards disaster preparedness, but most of the other projects, we coordinate with other line Ministries.

In terms of the Trust Fund, the Director can explain.

MR. N. NABULIWAQA.- Thank you, Madam Chairperson. The Prime Minister's Trust Fund is coordinated by the Ministry, in collaboration with the PM's Office. The honourable Prime Minister is a trustee of the Trust Fund, together with officials from the Ministry.

In terms of the allocations that is, sort of, given to the Trust Fund, that is, at this moment in time, purely a Gamono Fiji allocation. We do have balances from when we ask for public donations. All these are still deposited within the Trust Fund. The plans that the Ministry has in place is under the National Disaster Management Act, which was revised in 2024. We are going to expand the scope of the Prime Minister Trust Fund into a formalised Disaster Risk Management Fund in which it can accept funds from donors and partners. Those are the plans that we have in place right now, Madam Chairperson and honourable Members.

In terms of the current assistance modality or perhaps the mechanism in which the funds are accessed, it is currently limited to declared disasters only. So, we are working towards relaxing those guidelines. Given the nature of risks that we are now facing, more localised disasters or emergencies which do not necessarily require a declaration, but which occur frequently, so we are formulating a submission to Cabinet to relax those guidelines so that we can access funds more readily.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Madam Chairperson, I read in the news that after TC Yasa, residents of Nabavatu are still living in tents for over five years. Looking at all the climate-related hazards or disaster relief we get, how long does it take to relocate someone with a proper house?

In some countries jurisdictions, it is not the Government's job to provide you with a home. I think Australia has that way of doing things, but in Fiji, it has taken us five years. So, does the Prime Minister's National Disaster Relief and Rehabilitation Fund not have money, or was this just not a priority? I understand homes were made under the previous Government and were completed under this Government. Governments come and go; the idea is about providing these critical services to the people.

So, *TC Yasa*, five years ago, people are still living in tents. What can be changed from your Ministry as an implementation partner and with the greater stakeholders? Why are we five years? How long can it take for someone to be provided a home after a tropical cyclone, or was it not a priority to do so?

MR. N. NABULIWAQA.- Honourable Member, through you, Madam Chairperson, we must remember that the leading agency for climate-related and disaster relocation is the Ministry of Climate Change. Through the Climate Change Act 2021, we are the primary implementation partner. Funds for relocation is through the Relocation Trust Fund, and it does not come from the Prime Minister's Trust Fund which is more or less dedicated to disaster response.

There have been continuous discussions with the communities in terms of the consent for the piece of land in which they are going to be relocated and there have been several studies that need to be made - geotechnical assessments, in terms of the safety of the new site that they are moving into now. That takes time, honourable Member. At the same time, we were formulating the national guidelines around relocation that was led by the Ministry of Climate Change.

The experience that we have had with the other relocation sites, Vunidogoloa and the other, they were done but there were aspects that were not really thought out well. In the case of Nabavatu, we had lessons that we learned from previous experiences and that is, in truth, some of the reasons why the relocation to Nabavatu has taken a bit more time. That being said, honorable Member, the completion of the Nabavatu relocation should be done by December this year.

MR. M. CAMA.- Just to add on to that, Madam Chairperson and honourable Members, we also faced a few challenges that we faced during construction was the weather and we had issues with

the availability of materials. Those are all contributing factors to the delay in relocating to the Nabavatu site.

HON. T.R. MATASAWALEVU.- How are you doing the assessment, if any disaster was to happen to any province? Are you working and linking with the District Officer and the PA, or who do you direct the funds to?

MR. M. CAMA.- I apologise, through you, Madam Chairperson, I will try to understand your question in terms of awareness of the disaster.

MR. N. NABULIWAQA.-Through you, Madam Chairperson, for all disasters, the lead agencies on the ground are the Divisional Commissioners, and then we have the Provincial Administrators and the District Officers, who basically liaises directly with the communities.

Following any disaster, we conduct initial damage assessments by which we then gather the information on the needs of the communities. This is consolidated at divisional level, sent through to the National Emergency Operations Centers and then we make a distribution of funds to the Divisions in order to procure and roll out the needed relief items, including food ration and the like. So, it is, basically, a coordinated mechanism between the Divisions and the NDRMO, but the actual funding and implementation is disbursed from Headquarters down to the Divisions to implement.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Honourable Members, are there any further questions?

HON. V. LAL.- Through you, Madam Chairperson, the partnership between Fiji and Australia has been there for long and you have raised it in your opening statement. My question is, why is there a need for this Vuvale Union and the Veitacini Treaty now? Why are we going into it now since the partnership has been there for years and years?

MR. M. CAMA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, I think that question will be best answered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We are more like an implementing agency through the Vuvale Partnership. For us, it does not matter whether it becomes a partnership or treaty, as long as the fund is available for us to implement the needs on the ground, we are happy with that.

HON. V. LAL.- Madam Chairperson, I can see that, I mean, you have raised this question about your concerns in regard to the implementing arrangement under the Veitacini Treaty, and there

are some concerns which you have raised in regard to Article 7 - Visiting Forces. So, were these issues raised in your initial consultation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs?

MR. M. CAMA.- Through you, Madam Chairperson, that is a good question. I do not think that that issue was really covered well during consultations because if it was consultable, we can easily pick that up. So now, when the document is in the form of a treaty, then we realise that the elements of civil-led is not really captured well in the treaty. So, for us, especially, when we discuss with most of our donors, they still prefer civil-led humanitarian disaster response. I think that is something that we really need to weigh carefully in terms of rebalancing the interest of other donors who are also willing to contribute in terms of the overall disaster response.

HON. V. LAL.- Madam Chairperson, these two Treaties are explicitly with Fiji and Australia. In regard to procurement, will this restrict your Ministry or other Ministries from buying equipment outside of Australia because this is to do mainly with Australia and Fiji?

MR. N. NABULIWAQA.- Thank you, honourable Member, and through you, Madam Chairperson, whilst Australia remains one of the most trusted partners for Fiji, we, in the humanitarian and disaster space, are not limited to the assistance that is offered by Australia. We do have other donors and partners, and I am sure that this Treaty does not limit us to solely Australia in that regard.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you, Sir. Does that answer your question, honourable Lal?

HON. V. LAL.- Yes, thank you.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- *Vinaka*. Any other questions from the honourable Members?

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Yes, Madam Chairperson. To the implementation agency, the Ministry before us, Australia has a very large coal industry with $1.649 billion injected, as according to the last Coal Annual Report. Some are saying that Australia is a big polluter in the Pacific, yet Fiji has vulnerabilities when it comes to climate disaster, relief management and financing as well. So, how can someone be a big polluter and then gives us a very small chunk - $1.5 billion, which is like $150 million per year. That is nothing. What are your views on that, or what were your views in terms of what you submitted to the Ministry of Climate Change and the

Ministry of Foreign Affairs when this Treaty was being formalised? Does it silence the voices of the Pacific, although they have suffered from climate disasters for decades?

MR. M. CAMA.- Through you, honourable Member, that is a very good question. That is something that all line Ministries are also supporting, through the Ministry of Climate Change who is our lead Government representative in terms of negotiation, that idea of increasing proportions of developed countries contribution to small countries like us, who always bear the burden of the result of those pollution because for us, even at the Ministry, that is something that we really experience at the community level - rising sea levels, which the end result is the request for seawalls, evacuation centres, et cetera. So, we all support that idea in terms of the increased share of their contribution, given the level of pollution that they contribute, compared to us, Fiji.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- So, are you saying that we support Australia's carbon emissions?

MR. M. CAMA.- No, what I am saying is, we support more donors coming in because that is something we cannot really influence. It is just the reciprocal donor support that help us to adapt to some of the results of climate change that we currently experience.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- I have another question on maritime development. I know we need better ports and surveillance systems when traveling to the maritime. You must be aware, as an implementation partner, that Australia signed the AUKUS with the UK and US, and their plans are to mobilize nuclear submarines by 2030 in Australia and by 2040, Australia is to build their own nuclear submarines because of the geopolitics that is at play. Do you see Fiji or the maritime islands, being future docking ports for nuclear submarines? Has that been ever considered aspart of the discussion?

MR. M. CAMA.- I think we are open to that idea, given the fact that this is one of the major challenges that we have been discussing in the Ministry - the security of our EEZ. We really welcome that and I think we also discussed the need, and we are not representing the Naval Division, but we always advocate for the need to invest more towards our naval boat because right now, we have been advocating for our community to monitor their own *i qoliqoli* areas, but they do not have the capacity to do that. That is why we always encourage investment towards our Naval Division to help us monitor those areas that are very hard for us to monitor. So, we welcome the docking place for submarines, particularly in our maritime islands. They can also assist in the monitoring of, especially, illegal fishing and drugs that are also frequently captured on the maritime islands.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- I think I should just, at this moment, perhaps remind everyone that Fiji has signed up to the Non-Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as well. So, that will also protect us if we are speaking about nuclear submarines that are carrying nuclear arms, instead of nuclearpowered submarines which, I think, is what AUKUS talks about instead of submarines that are carrying nuclear arms.

HON. V. LAL.- Madam Chairperson, one last question from me, in terms of our geographical location and also the impact of climate change, I think we are on the receiving end compared to Australia. Does that mean that Australia is going to fund the reconstruction of our seawalls, our village relocations, et cetera? They have their own needs and we are not very much different from what Australia is, so when it comes to that, are they going to fund all these?

MR. N. NABULIWAQA.- Thank you very much, honorable Member. Through you, Madam Chairperson, I think this is also related to the question that was posed by the honourable Member. Yes, we do have financing mechanisms that are in place - the PM's Trust Fund, the Relocation Trust Fund, and we are actively advocating for donors and partners to contribute to these Trust Funds in order to assist us in terms of alleviating the impacts of climate change. We have done the necessary studies, in collaboration with Ministry of Environment and Climate Change. We have a list of communities that need assistance. So, we have been actively advocating for donors and partners to contribute to the needs of the country.

I think we are all aware of the pressing need of not only our country but the Pacific in general. So that is a point that we have been, sort of, emphasising in our discussions with our donors and partners.

MR. M. CAMA.- To add on to that, Madam Chairperson, it is a great idea and that is why we advocate the need for our development partners to support our Trust Funds because the cost of building seawalls is always an expensive exercise. That is why most of the requests for seawalls take us time to complete because of the limited budget that we receive for that, so we always request donor funds to help us in that regard. We have been discussing this morning their contribution towards the Trust Fund and the opportunity to have this Rural Development Fund to always contribute which will help us to fast-track some of the demand for seawalls that we currently receive right now.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Through you, Madam Chairperson, I just want to give the Officials before us an opportunity. You know how governance works that sometimes we have to continuously advocate for an idea for it to actually be funded and it materialises. What would be your ask as a Ministry, looking at all the relocations and all critical infrastructure? Before bridges, you have to

go just above the river, but now we have actual bridges which cost millions of dollars and their maintenance. So, in totality, if Fiji had to achieve all of its relocations for communities and work on some critical infrastructure, what would be your Ministry's ask?

MR. M. CAMA.- I am trying to understand your question, honourable Member.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- If I may, honourable Sharma, with all the work before you, if you had a magic lamp, rub the lamp and a genie came out and asked you what your main wish was, what would be your main wish for your Ministry?

MR. J. NAVUKU.- *Bula vinaka*. Through you, Madam Chairperson, thank you for the question. In sharing what we have done so far and what we intend to do, to answer the question, in January earlier this year, the Ministry consolidated all the critical development requests from the 14 Provincial Offices and four Divisional Offices. We came up with a list of unfunded requests, and as we speak, it is around 105,100,300 requests, based on our nine programmes.

If it is for relocation, honourable Member, there are 43 communities that are being earmarked to be assessed to the new SOP for relocation. And if they are deemed to be relocated, we use the average sum that we are using for Nabavatu, which is $6 million or $7 million per relocation. And for Nabavatu relocation, through you, Madam Chairperson, I just want to acknowledge the New Zealand Government for also assisting with the funding for the relocation so far. If you use the number, multiply by 43, so for rural development, you will have that written figure, and we are in the process of strengthening the instrumental Project Dossier where we put in our detailed requests with explanatory notes. I am sure you are familiar with that, Sir.

We would like to strengthen the pathway with the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who looks after 13 Missions so that we can also share that Project Dossier and help us fund our nine Programmes.

To answer your question, honourable Member, through you, Madam Chairperson, around $105 million at the beginning of this year. We went to Ministry of Finance, unfortunately, given other priorities, they just gave us $16 million. If it was to our wish list and the Ministry of Finance gave us 105 million, we would be dealing with that. For relocation, it is 43 communities, multiplied by $6 million, and you do the math, that is the kind of numbers we are looking at.

MR. M. CAMA.- I just want to add, Madam Chairperson, that we slightly changed our methodology of submitting our budget to the Ministry of Finance in the last financial year. We want to ensure that the Ministry of Finance understands the current demand that we receive on

the ground because sometimes, we submit our actual budget submission without realising the actual demands that we receive on the ground. That is why we changed our submission for this financial year to include the demand for each of the nine programmes that we have and our target for this financial year so that they can be aware, Alright, when we give you this budgetary allocation for this financial year, we are aware of the huge demand that is out there. Otherwise, as already alluded by the Deputy Secretary, the high expectation of our communities always received by our officers on the ground and then when we push their demand across to the Ministry of Finance, we only receive a limited package of envelope that we work on. Just for your information, Madam Chairperson and honourable Members.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you, Sirs. I really appreciate your time this morning.

I think there are no more questions from the Committee, so at this time, I want to wish you all the best and thank you for your time this morning, Permanent Secretary, Acting Deputy Secretary, and also Director of National Disaster Management Office. I also want to say thank you very much for identifying those gaps. That is really important for us as we go back and talk about our report to Parliament. I hope that you will be open to some more questions, perhaps, just written questions to yourselves and written answers back to us about the areas that you have identified as gaps.

Having said that, I want to wish you all the very best and put your best foot forward for preCOP and also for COP31.

I want to thank the Secretariat and also to the ladies from the Media Unit and Hansard, *vinaka vakalevu*. I call this meeting to a close.

The Committee Meeting adjourned at 10.10 a.m.

Ministry of Finance

[VERBATIM REPORT]

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

UNION/TREATY

(1) FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION
(2) OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE (VEITACINI TREATY)

ENTITY: Ministry of Finance
VENUE: Big Committee Room 2 (East Wing)
DATE: Tuesday, 6th October, 2026

VERBATIM REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE HELD AT THE COMMITTEE ROOM (EAST WING), PARLIAMENT PRECINCTS, GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, ON TUESDAY, 6TH OCTOBER, 2026, AT 11.17 A.M.

Present

Hon. L.S. Qereqeretabua	-	Chairperson
Hon. R.R. Sharma	-	Deputy Chairperson
Hon. T.R. Matasawalevu	-	Member
Hon. V. Lal	-	Member

Apologies

Hon. P.K. Ravunawa	-	Member
Hon. I. Tuiwailevu	-	Member

Submittee: Ministry of Finance In Attendance:

(1) Mr. Shiri Krishna Gounder - Permanent Secretary
(2) Mr. Munesh S. Deo - Head of Fiscal Policy, Research and Analysis
(3) Mr. Laurie Singh - Manager, International Co-operation
(4) Ms. Elenoa Vueti - Manager, Economic Policy
(5) Ms. Kiman Mala - Officer in Charge, Budget Division

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Honourable Members, representatives from the Ministry of Finance, including the Permanent Secretary, Mr. Shiri Gounder, members of the media and the public, ladies and gentlemen; a very good morning to you all. It is my pleasure to welcome you to this room.

I wish to advise that pursuant to the Standing Orders of Parliament, specifically Standing Order 111, all Committee meetings are open to the media and to the public. If there is any sensitive information relating to this submission that cannot be disclosed publicly, such information may be

provided to the Committee either in writing or in a closed session but this is only permitted in limited circumstances, including matters relating to national security, third party confidential information, personnel or human resource matters, and Committee deliberations and the development of the Committee's recommendations and report.

I wish to remind everyone in the room that all comments and questions should be directed through the Chair and for viewers following this meeting live on *Facebook*, you may submit questions via the comment section. Please note that only relevant questions will be considered by the Secretariat and the Committee. Members of the Committee will hold their questions until after the opening statement from the Ministry of Finance and because this is a parliamentary proceeding, all information provided is protected under the Parliamentary Powers and Privileges Act and the Standing Orders of Parliament. No slander or libel of any kind will be condoned and all information presented to this Committee should be factual.

We just ask that you turn your mobile phones silent and we keep movement within the meeting room to a minimum. I want to now introduce to you, PS and your Team, everyone else on this side of the room.

(Introduction of Committee Members and Secretariat)

Honourable Members, members of the public and the media, today the Committee will receive an in-person submission from the Ministry of Finance in relation to Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance or Veitacini Treaty. I will now invite the Minsitry of Finance Officials to introduce themselves and proceed with their submission, after which we will open the floor to questions.

(Introduction of Ministry of Finance Officials)

MR. S.K. GOUNDER.- Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and Committee Members, for the opportunity to the Ministry of Finance to provide our submission in terms of the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance. I think we will provide a Finance Economic viewpoint on the two very important legal texts that are before the Committee, and it is largely from a Ministry of Finance's perspective.

Firstly, I think Fiji and Australia have had a very long-lasting relationship and there has been people-to-people ties with almost over 100,000 Fijians and their descendants living in Australia.

We have almost 50 percent of our visitor arrivals from Australia with 50 percent of tourism earnings from the Australian tourist market.

In terms of source of remittances, Australia also is a very significant contributor to remittances, contributing almost 50 percent. So, 50 percent of remittances is about $700 million that comes from families and friends in Australia. Similarly, about $1.4 billion in tourism earnings is coming from Australian tourists that visit Fiji.

Also, in terms of trade, we have a very mature, well-developed trade relations with FijiAustralia trade, accounting for nearly 15 percent of our trade, with total trade value close to $2 billion. Australia is also a significant investor in Fiji with most of the private sector investments either in tourism, whether it is in the banking sector with the likes of ANZ and Westpac; in terms of communications with entities like Digicel, and various other private sector investments that operate in Fiji.

In terms of development financing and support that has been provided to the Government of Fiji through the Government of Australia, I think we, again, have a very strong, mature relationship in terms of development funding. In the recent past - the last seven to ten years, I think the relationship has strengthened significantly, especially post-pandemic with the support provided in terms of vaccines, significant budget support and other financing towards health and education, and various other development financing work in key areas.

Firstly, I think that both the Treaties; the Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance, basically, formalises this very mature, strong, deep relationship that Fiji and Australia have in a legal treaty form. That is point number one.

Secondly, I think as the Ministry of Finance and being part of the Treaty discussions on a number of occasions to get the treaty finalised, the second key dimension is that the economic security remains at the centre of the two Treaties. I think there has been a lot of emphasis around economic security, ensuring that Fiji and Australia will partner and ensure that our critical infrastructure, like ports, airports, energy infrastructure and telecommunications are protected.

I think to protect the economy, to ensure that we have economic resilience and continuity, especially in light of natural disasters and external shocks, I think that assurance being provided by

Australia in terms of working together in partnership and in protecting this critical infrastructure is key for economic resilience.

Secondly, I think the significant investment that is being announced by the Government of Australia as part of the Vuvale Union, so FJD 1 billion in grants and around FJD0.5 billion in terms of loans that would be provided by Australia, especially in terms of developing our key infrastructure and making it more resilient, especially, in terms of ports, shipbuilding and also the support that is going to be provided by Australia in the construction of a new hospital in the future, including strengthening health systems, fight against drugs, HIV and other transnational crime. So, I think that whole support in terms of making our infrastructure resilient, fighting against some of these issues around drugs and HIV has far long-lasting economic implications for Fiji. In terms of economic implications and the current challenge that we have with HIV, this has significant implications on the tourism industry. Collectively, fighting that is critical in terms of overall economic security, in terms of protecting people's jobs and overall livelihoods in Fiji.

The third bit is on economic diversification. As part of the discussions, as well as general national discussion, we all recognise that we need further diversification of the economy and look at other new sectors that can be nurtured and grown to ensure that our economy is much more resilient. This is something that we saw during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the closure of the borders and the implications on the tourism industry, given that we rely 40 percent on the tourism industry. It has significant impact in terms of jobs, livelihoods, Government finances and overall challenges to the economy.

So, the whole focus around economic diversification, with Australia being a major market for Fiji and the opportunity that is being presented to Fiji to grow that market again is critical in terms of overall economic security. The other element to this issue on economic security is that both the Treaties recognise that national security is critical for economic security. The fight against drugs and other transnational crime, including trafficking and other issues, is very much critical to provide that confidence to the private sector and the enabling environment that will support economic security and development.

The other element, again, relating to critical infrastructure is on supply chain resilience, given some of the challenges that we have seen in terms of global conflicts, in terms of supply chain restructuring, especially with major developments globally. The supply chain assurance from Australia means a lot in terms of our economy, our private sector, and availability of critical items, like ensuring food security, ensuring that we have medicine and all other economic inputs that generally transit through our borders.

The third dimension is that this is the first time we have a treaty or a arrangement with a development partner that commits such an amount of development financing to Fiji. As I have said, we have had a very good development partnership with Australia, and the treaty with the Vuvale Union provides a very predictable certain 10-year financing support from Australia, with almost a billion dollars in grants and around $500 million in loans that would be channelled through Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP), which is the financing institution that provides loan funding to the Pacific Island Countries.

As the Ministry of Finance, given this financing predictability, it is very useful for us in terms of budgeting and gives us the certainty in terms of how we plan our projects, how we ensure that there is proper appropriation, and ensure that the key projects that are a part of the treaty is being delivered. There are a lot more predictability and certainty.

Secondly, just to clarify an additional bit on the financing, we should not also see this as just a $1.5 billion financing deal, but there is the long-lasting effect from making sure that Fiji is secure, there is peace and we are able to fight some of transnational crimes, like the drugs issue and HIV issue, ensuring that our critical infrastructure is protected, our supply chain is secure, it has far more economic benefits than the $1.5 billion dollars that is the pure financing commitment from Australia. The economic benefit is far more than these $1.5 billion dollars.

Third, again, on this financing issue, when we look at some of the financing components, especially on key infrastructure, the funding support from Australia helps mobilise and leverage other financing from multilateral parties. For example, as part of the $1.5 billion financing support, there is a critical component on health sector. So, we are using that grant funding to leverage and get additional financing from multilateral partners, like ADB and World Bank.

This new Pacific Healthy Islands Transformation (PHIT) Project that was announced is part of that major project. So, this funding is not in isolation but also forms part of other co-financing that is happening with key multilateral partners and other development financiers.

On the fourth point, given the fiscal situation of the country, especially post pandemic, the increase in the debt levels and the challenges that we are seeing globally, we have a very limited fiscal space and the ability of Government to deliver on major infrastructure projects which are much needed, given the significant infrastructure gap that we have. So, the provision of $1 billion grant, I think, provides a lot of relief in terms of ensuring that we have fiscal stability. This $1

billion will not create debt which, again, I think is a big relief in terms of our fiscal situation also on the fiscal front.

I think economic security, as I discussed earlier, is ensuring that our economy is much more resilient and is able to withstand major shocks, whether it is a major disaster that disrupts our ports or disrupts our airport or disrupts our energy infrastructure. I think protecting against that, again, is a big source of fiscal relief because in the event if our major national assets go down, the severe disruptions to economic activity have a devastating impact on the fiscal dimension of things. Therefore, I think the Treaty will help us assure fiscal stability by protecting the economy.

Again, given that the Ministry of Finance coordinates development partner financing and we manage taxpayer resources, I think it is important to highlight that most or all of this funding would be channeled through national systems. What does this mean? This means that the funding would have to be appropriately appropriated or budgeted, as we have had in the past. It will form part of the national budget. It will go through our own financial systems, procurement procedures, financial reporting, internal audit and external oversight, including reporting to Parliament and oversight by Parliament.

This funding support and these projects will not sit outside the system but within the part of our national systems, just similar to what we have been doing in the past. Probably, there is a bit of confusion on that, so we wanted to just clarify that as part of the implementation.

I think this is just a broad overarching Treaty that governs and provides the framework in terms of cooperation but there will be various subsidiary agreements that would be in place in terms of managing the specifics of the implementation of the various priorities that are part of the Treaty.

I have a bit of a breakdown, and I am not sure if any other Ministry has provided, but generally a high-level breakdown of the $1.5 billion funding. I think the first significant component is in terms of the fight against transnational crime and illicit drugs, that is, FJD284 million. Then we have FJD158 million in terms of support to the health sector, which includes fighting the HIV crisis, as well as support towards hospital investment and strengthening of our health system. We have FJD228 million in grant and FJD550 million in loans for infrastructure development and climate resilience, especially, in terms of projects around the Nadi River Flood Alleviation, shipbuilding, and some of the envisaged future projects in terms of ports development and FJD146 million in digital transition for digital infrastructure upgrades within the public sector and around FJD48 million for economic security and diversification, over close to $90 million for skills development

and others, so these are very indicative high-level breakdown in terms of the $1.5 billion. As I have said, once we frame up the details in terms of the exact project and deliverables on the ground, there will be various other subsidiary agreements and arrangements that we will have to enter with the Government of Australia.

One of the other integral parts of our relationship with Australia and our development cooperation has been the support that we get from Australia in terms of implementation. Fiji, given the skills crisis that we have, given the significant loss of people from both the private and the public sector, there is currently a major capacity constraint across the board, especially, if we have to deliver on some of these major significant projects.

I think as we have seen with some of the development work by Australia, especially, with the reconstruction of schools in Vanua Levu, some of the work with the medical infrastructure, I think that hands-on support with implementation, the technical capacity and know-how, that is going to be very very useful.

Given also that we have a huge Australian private sector in Fiji and the existing relationships and support that we get from Australia with the existing private sector and the multilateral institutions and other international organisations, that is all going to be very helpful in terms of deliverables on the ground and implementation. As we have seen with the Australian Budget Support Programmes, the economic financial reforms that form part of this budget support operation also has much longerterm benefits than the project itself.

As I have said, maybe, the last bit on the private sector, given the limits on how much the public sector can drive the economy, growth and jobs, the role of the private sector is critical. I think the Treaty looks into that area on how we provide the enabling infrastructure and support so that the private sector is able to drive the economy.

Maybe, I will end here and take on the questions or provide any other clarification that you have. Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you very much, Mr. Gounder, Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Finance. I will now open the floor to the Committee Members for any questions.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, how well were you consulted when this Treaty came into force or before it was signed? How many Ministries, not exactly numbers, but was there good participation by the other Permanent Secretaries? What we heard from them was no, not really. Some were not informed. Some do not even know, and they wish to be part of the Workplan.

The second part of the question is, you mentioned about how the funding will be used. Is there a Workplan that is in draft? Is it under your responsibility or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs? I would just like to know that, PS.

MR. S.K. GOUNDER.-

Perhaps, just to clarify, the treaty process was led by the Office of the Prime Minister with the involvement of Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Of course, the Ministry of Finance was also involved. I have been part of a number of discussions on the Treaty itself, given that, as I have said, we are a key stakeholder in terms of development partner coordination and funding support that is received from development partners. So, within the Ministry of Finance, as part of the international cooperation team, there has been a lot of discussions in trying to understand and prioritise the projects.

I think the other point of clarification is if you look at all the projects that have been prioritised, these are part of the National Development Plan and some of the contemporary challenges, especially around HIV, drugs, and law and order. In terms of the consultation with other Ministries, yes, there have been other agencies, like Ministry of Health, have been consulted, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Immigration, and some of the other Permanent Secretaries.

However, for Ministry of Finance, there have been a lot of involvement from our end as part of the discussion, especially in terms of the prioritisation of the work plan. Given that this is a 10year arrangement on the Work plan, there is going to be continuous discussions and fine-tuning and arrangements that would be eventually after that.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- PS, I am glad you were part of the core discussion, so I can have some good questions for you. Why $1.5 billion? I think it is less. For example, Australia released the Annual Coal Report, $164.9 billion was pumped into the economy. In the news, on the front page of the *Fiji Times*, it was stated that they are expanding the coal industry which, in turn, means more carbon pollution and emissions, causing climate change issues for us. Vulnerable communities are being affected. Essentially, the message is, we are going to continue expanding our polluting industries, but we will provide you with a portion of the revenue so that you can address some of the issues arising from it. What position does Fiji take in terms of holding those bigger carbon emitters accountable by taking a small handout? What is Fiji's position in terms of this?

MR. S.K. GOUNDER.- I will start with the funding. Since the pandemic, there has been a very strong engagement with Australia in terms of financing support. We have, on average, received around $100 million. This is the average, so in certain areas, it is much more than $100 million,

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MR. S.K. GOUNDER.-

certain years it is less than that. On average we have been receiving around $100 million dollars in grant support and there are already existing programmes that Australia has.

This $1.5 billion is in addition to that support. It is a great question whether it is too little or too much. If you have to put this into perspective, roughly a billion dollars in grant or 1.5 billion in grant and loan, is financing per year. Relative to our total financing, it is just around two to three percent.

We also have to be careful that when engaging in terms of projects that we can deliver and not over commit to an extremely large programme that we cannot deliver, making sure that the projects are the priorities of the Government of Fiji. As I mentioned, the projects that have been included as part of the Treaty discussion and the Workplan are from the National Development Plan (NDP) and if we can get more, that would be welcomed. However, 10 years certainty that has been provided, was not there before. At least we know that there is $1.5 billion dollar funding that is available from Australia and we can plan that. The predictability was not there.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Can I just ask a question on predictability? As you mentioned, what happens if Governments change and an incoming Government does not have the same priority as the current prime minister who has signed these Treaties?

The Treaty is flexible enough to have that continuous discussion with Australia. There are various forums at ministerial level and also at bureaucratic level to look at these issues and if there are changes in priorities, I am sure there is flexibility around that.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- I have a follow up question. In which direction is Fiji moving? You would be the best to answer this question, considering the knowledge of the gaps and vulnerabilities that exist as we go forward? I will say this out loud, we know we are heavily taxed, people are not productive, they are not going to work, we have a lot of foreign workers and we have tonnes of issues, yet we are continuously taking so much support and concessional loans in this country.

How do you ensure that our vulnerabilities are not exploited through these funding mechanisms? I am sure there will be many others because they will have interests and global powers have various interests in the Pacific. How do we, sort of, prevent our vulnerabilities from being exploited by taking over, by receiving these handouts, I would say, and is our begging bowl getting bigger?

MR. S.K. GOUNDER.-

MR. S.K. GOUNDER.- If you look at some of the priorities, and as part of the discussions, the focus is on inclusive development, for example, fighting HIV/AIDS, drugs issue, transnational crime, strengthening our health system and diversifying the economy. This, ultimately, is going to benefit the people at large. I mean, I do not see it as handouts that is going to create a dependency culture but more so in terms of it trying to resolve or solve some of these major issues that is going to be very very costly to the country and to our people if not dealt with, especially, if you see the significant funding towards HIV and this drugs issue.

I think the focus is on cultural exchanges, strengthening the people-to-people connection and the issues around economic diversification. There is also a component, if you see on economic diversification, around agriculture and rural development. So, it is generally targeted towards helping the people at the grassroot level and solving some of these major issues. I do not think these are direct handouts given to people but trying to solve these major issues.

HON. T.R. MATASAWALEVUI.- Through you, Madam Chairperson, one of the things you mentioned is shipbuilding at Walu Bay. Do you have a plan to rebuild that shipbuilding because it will bring money back to the country?

MR. S.K. GOUNDER.- So as part of the discussions and as part of the project priorities, that is one of the areas and the Australian Government was engaged in terms of conducting a feasibility study and in terms of making sure that we have the right due diligence, we understand what needs to be done, whether there is a business case, and if there is, who is going to put in the money, and whether there is long-term sustainability to the project. So, this is currently at the moment more of due diligence and feasibility.

It also fits in this bigger issue around port redevelopment, which is a significant long-term project that Government is pursuing, together with major partners like Australia, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, which is funded by the US Government and also ADB, the World Bank and other partners. So currently, it is more at feasibility study level.

HON. V. LAL.- Thank you, PS, for your presentation. You have given a breakdown of the usage of that FJD1.5 billion and the Work plan, which most of the stakeholders were not aware of,

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MR. S.K. GOUNDER.-

the 10-year Workplan, and you have touched on that. Is this Workplan formalized? Can you tell us where we will be in five years' time now?

This is this is a draft Workplan. As I have said, the Treaty basically formalizes this existing relationship that we have with Australia. Eventually, when we start implementing these projects over the years on specific sectors, specific projects, there are going to be separate agreements and arrangements that is going to be used to deliver on to that.

This is a draft and all the key agencies are going to be implementing most of the projects. For example, Ministry of Defence, the Police, Ministry of Health and Medical Services, Ministry of Finance and other key stakeholders, like Ministry of Public Works. We will work together with them to finalise this thing. These are indicative preliminary numbers and framework that is there and it is going to be delivered over a 10-year period.

HON. V. LAL.- Just to follow up on that, and I am talking about economic growth and fiscal stability. How will the Ministry of Finance integrate this fiscal stability into Fiji's national budget planning and medium-term fiscal strategy?

MR. S.K. GOUNDER.- As I have said earlier, all these projects will be delivered through national systems, which means that eventually, when the funding is committed and the projects are ready to be implemented on the ground, you will see these numbers in the appropriation and the budget books.

However, before we get to that stage, there is a lot more work that is required in terms of, for example, designing these projects, calling for tenders, getting the due diligence, and making sure that we have the implementation capacity to deliver on these projects. You will see all these in the upcoming budgets for the next 10 years and also as part of the reporting of further subsidiary agreements that are going to be signed and projects that are going to be happening on the ground.

HON. V. LAL.- Madam Chairperson, through you, to upgrade these critical public assets and infrastructure and what not, is Australia going to finance all these infrastructure requirements for

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MR. S.K. GOUNDER.-

Fiji? You know our economy and there is a big gap between Fiji and Australia and we are largely dependent on Australia. Is it going to be financed fully by Australia?

MR. S.K. GOUNDER.- No. As I have said, and to put that into perspective, if we are going to get around of $150 million per year, that is just around 2 percent to 3 percent of our total funding envelope for every year. So, Government collects roughly $4 billion in tax revenues, plus other sources of revenue, and this is $150 million of that bigger $4 billion. I do not think it is creating an over-dependency on Australia, that is one.

Secondly, I think this funding helps us leverage other financing from multilateral partners, like ADB and World Bank, in the years ahead. Once we have some of this grant financing, there will be other development partners, like ADB and World Bank, especially, for example, in the ports. They are going to put in more resources to complement that. This funding also complements the Fiji Government's funding, for example, in areas like health sector spending, fight against drugs, HIV/AIDS, so this complements that.

HON. V. LAL.- Madam Chairperson, just adding to that, if we are not fully dependent on Australia, have we done any analysis on how it is going to affect our domestic tax revenue and custom receipts and tariff structures in tally?

MR. S.K. GOUNDER.- As I have said, because there is a big element around economic security, making sure that our key assets are resilient and supported by Australia, it gives us that security and resilience in terms of the economy. For example, if tomorrow we have a major disaster

that blows away or we have major disruptions to the Nadi International Airport, it is going to have significant impact on the economy, to the jobs, tourism earnings, Government revenue and the economy.

I think what this treaty assures is in the event like that, the Government of Australia is going to come in and ensure that those assets are protected, or we are able to get back on our feet much quicker than without the support of Australia. By providing that economic security, I think it is going to create a lot of resilience for us as an economy and protect our lives and livelihoods.

This grant component, as honourable Sharma said, given our fiscal situation, I think this is a significant amount of grant, although compared to the overall level of financing that we have which is relatively small, but it provides the much-needed fiscal room that is currently not there. It helps fix some of this very important infrastructure which needs urgent support.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Madam Chairperson, I thank the PS. This $1.5 billion, looking at how Fiji's national budgets are going, our gross deficits are increasing. For this $1.5 billion, are we going to see budget support being taken from these fundings?

MR. S.K. GOUNDER.- Some would be budget support, and some would be in the form of project financing but largely, if you look at the breakdown of this $1.5 billion, it is going to be project financing.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, you have spoken about issues like HIV. It is a domestic issue, in the sense it is more of an epidemic, or I would say, there is more of a reactive response. Until it is a crisis, we are not moving as a nation. This is what I personally feel, to combat it, so we create the issue, then we look for aid from overseas. What does that say about us as a nation in terms of our budget numbers, like national budget numbers? Do you think Fiji is really performing as a country where we cannot solve our own issues, we cannot generate our own funds and the dependency on aid is just increasing? What are we doing and what are we not doing as a nation? We do not have return on investments. As you have said, Government earns $4 billion dollars. How is the money channeled? How are the return on investments that we are not able to even stand on our own feet and be less dependent on this kind of aid or support?

MR. M.S. DEO.- I think some of these challenges that we are facing, I think a lot of countries in the Pacific is also facing similar challenges, like fighting against HIV, drugs. That is something that was not a major issue maybe 10 or 20 years ago. What the Government of the day is

trying to do is, we have got the priorities, and I think transnational crime illicit drugs is one of the highest priorities at this point in time.

We understand that in Fiji, a lot of the HIV issues is related to drugs as well, sharing of needles and all those things. I think Government is stepping up in terms of fighting some of these. I think we can acknowledge, as PS Finance has already mentioned, that we need to fight together as a region and I think we should be very grateful in terms of Australia coming on board, trying to assist us, trying to hold our hands to fight some of these major challenges.

I think going forward with the kind of support that Australia has pledged, I think it gives the predictability - the surety that okay, we are going to have this assistance for you for the next 10 years.

Honourable Lal mentioned about the economic pie. There will be a lot of spin-offs in terms of some of these projects around port development, hospital upgrades, which will have economic ramifications in terms of increasing the size of the economic pie so that will ultimately benefit everyone. I think with this kind of investments, especially around strategic assets like airports, I think it is going to benefit Fiji overall.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Through you, what has the Treaty missed out on? In your opinion, you felt like it should have been there.

MR. L. SINGH.- Thank you for the question. Firstly, just back to the point that the Head of Fiscal Policy, Research and Analysis had mentioned, I think with this financing, Australia is actually taking responsibility. As you can see, sometimes these drugs is not bound for Fiji just for Fiji, but as a shipping point to other more developed countries, like Australia and New Zealand. So this funding that is coming in is actually taking responsibility and helping Fiji address the issues that they are currently facing with regards to issues of drugs coming through, and then we become users of the ports to these other developed countries. I think that, in itself, shows that there is support coming in.

As PS also alluded to, this is in addition to the current existing support that Australia has already pledged to and continue to give, and this is just a formalisation of funding that is coming in. Something that we, in the Ministry of Finance, have been advocating for in the development spaces, trying to get security to understand the amount of development finance that is coming into the country. With this Treaty, it gives us that stability that we are able to plan our future as well, that we know that there is a certainty with regards to money that is

spent in different areas whereby we can prioritise the other developing priorities of Fiji with the taxpayer funds that is coming in. Thank you.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- I hope with that being said that the Australians also start guarding our Court exhibits, so that things do not go missing.

HON. V. LAL.- Perhaps, a last one from me. Article 5(2) of the Treaty requires the establishment of an Ocean of Peace Centre in Suva. What ongoing operational and budgetary commitments will Fiji be required to contribute toward the operational cost of the Ocean of Peace Alliance and the associated regional trade frameworks?

MR. S.K. GOUNDER.- As part of the $1.5 billion financing, $39 million is earmarked for the establishment of the Ocean of Peace Centre. However, moving forward, I think in terms of the operational cost, that is something that we will have to put out from our normal budgetary process. However, in terms of the establishment, $39 million is earmarked for this.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- In terms of trade with Australia now, are we going to see any change of trade formulation and taxation formulation with Australia, we are going to see more Australian products in Fiji or more Fijian products in Australia under this Treaty, or this is just more around defence?

MR. S.K. GOUNDER.- No, again, I will go back to this. All the interventions, as part of the Treaty, whether it is fighting drugs and HIV, helps reduce the cost of doing business or improve productivity, which is very critical for us to ensure that we are able to produce goods and services in Fiji that we can export to Australia.

Given the size of the Australian market, I think there is a huge opportunity for us to grow our exports but at the end of the day, I think in terms of growing that export market, there is a lot that needs to be done domestically and the intervention around economic diversification, some of the investments around agribusiness and agri-processing, there is scope there. However, I think that needs a lot of intervention domestically to be able to exploit that market.

The market in terms of the Australian market is relatively huge. If you look at our trade relations with Australia, we have a trade deficit. I think we import significantly far more than how much we export to Australia. So, I think with the Treaty, with the investments in critical

infrastructure and the support for the private sector, that will help create impetus for our exports.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- What is the current tariffs with Australia right now, which Fiji has, back and forth in terms of export and import?

MR. S.K. GOUNDER.- Into Fiji, I would not have that with me, but we can provide that. I do not want to get it wrong.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Through you, Madam Chairperson, $1.5 billion for 10 years is fine, but sometimes, PS, you may realize that the $1 billion or $1 billion of aid that is given to Fiji by a country, they would want that Fiji to purchase their products. They would want their consultants. So much of the grant or loan is actually then taken back to the country that has given the funding. How does it work for this Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union for the $1.5 billion? Are we subjected just to buy Australian made products, digital equipment, their consultants or Fiji has sort of a free hand to choose who is best to provide tomorrow. Australia is providing the aid, we are buying Chinese equipment, would that not be an issue because they are cheaper?

MR. S.K. GOUNDER.- No, there are no explicit restrictions like that. As I have said, it all follows the national system so it follows Government procurement processes and, of course, issues that you have mentioned will go through a very fair and transparent process to make sure that we get the best out for Fiji.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you, PS. I think there are no further questions from the Committee. Any other remarks from your Team, PS?

MS. E. VUETI.- Thank you, Madam Chairperson. In regard to trade and for trade-related matters, we will all follow the World Trade Agreement and whatever rules are there, and Fiji or Australia will have to abide by it. I think in all trade matters, you have to follow the most favoured nation treatment or national treatment policies.

Also, at the moment, we (Fiji) are still undertaking consultation under the PACER Plus, which Australia and New Zealand are both involved in. We have not signed the Agreement, but we had started consulting with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Government of

Australia and New Zealand, on how Fiji can also be involved in PACER Plus. I think that is where trade will come into place. Thank you.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Madam Chairperson, through you, on PACER Plus, it is best that we do not sign it for now. We went to New Zealand, we spoke to their Government and we realised that we cannot even meet the weekly quota. So, until we have land available, the farm will supply three 40 feet containers of turmeric per week, so Fiji should not be just signing documents when we know we cannot supply.

MADAM CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you, honourable Members, for all your questions today.

I thank PS for bringing your Team to us. I want to thank you very, very much for your time and your cooperation. If we have any other questions, we will send that to your Office for written questions and written replies. Thank you, honourable Members.

The Committee Meeting adjourned at 12.04 p.m.

Written Submissions Received in Their Personal Capacity

Mr. Savenaca Siwatibau

SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

On the Fiji–Australia Vuvale Union

with reference to the Ocean of Peace Alliance ('Veitacini Treaty')

Submitted in a personal capacity by

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Date: 01/09/2026

Addressed to: The Chairperson, Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, Parliament of the Republic of Fiji

Introduction and basis for this submission

I make this submission in a personal capacity in response to the Committee's call for submissions on the Fiji–Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance ('Veitacini Treaty'). My comments concern the Vuvale Union, and in particular its implications for Fiji's information and communications technology (ICT) sector, our cybersecurity workforce, and the retention of skilled Fijian professionals.

I draw on more than 26 years' experience in Fiji's ICT industry, and on my ongoing volunteer work in community digital literacy and online safety. The views expressed here are entirely my own. They do not represent the views of any employer, agency or organisation, and should be read as the observations of a private citizen with long professional experience in this field.

I support the intent of the Vuvale Union. A deeper, treaty-level partnership with Australia brings real resources and a credible framework for cooperation, and I do not oppose ratification. My purpose is narrower and constructive: to help ensure that, in the areas I know best, the partnership is implemented in a way that builds Fijian capability rather than substituting for it. The distinction between those two outcomes is, in my view, the single most important question the Committee can weigh in the ICT domain.

Summary of position

My position can be stated in six points:

- The Vuvale Union offers Fiji genuine resources and a serious security partnership, and its stated goals — security and prosperity — are the right ones.
- A partnership framed around security and prosperity delivers either only if it builds indigenous capability. Security that depends permanently on others is not sovereignty, and prosperity that is delivered rather than grown does not take root.
- In my professional experience, Fiji's ICT ecosystem is under-developed and losing skilled people abroad: few new ICT firms are being formed, cybersecurity professionals struggle to build sustainable businesses, and the academic pipeline and infrastructure base have not kept pace.

- Several provisions of the Vuvale Union — economic integration, digital infrastructure investment, enhanced mobility, and third-party engagement in critical infrastructure — can either build local capability or entrench dependency. Left to its default trajectory, external investment tends toward dependency.
- The determining factor is the Vuvale Union Work Plan, which the treaty places under the Vuvale Bukmak (Article 7). This is where the Committee's scrutiny at the point of ratification can have the most lasting effect.
- The question, therefore, is not whether the partnership is 'beneficial' or 'dangerous' in the abstract. It is an instrument. The question is whether it is implemented to be one or the other.
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Fiji's ICT environment: the context this treaty enters

The following observations are offered as my professional judgement from more than two and a half decades in the sector, not as audited findings. I set them out because they describe the environment into which this investment will flow, and that environment shapes what the investment will produce.

- Very few new ICT companies are being established in Fiji, and those that start often struggle to survive for want of an enabling environment — capital, procurement access, mentorship and stable demand.
- Cybersecurity professionals in particular find it very difficult to start and sustain their own businesses, despite clear and growing national need for their skills.
- Support for the growth of new ICT academic and vocational programmes has been limited, which weakens the pipeline of new professionals.
- There has been little major new ICT infrastructure built domestically in recent years, and few breakthrough local ventures of the kind that would signal a dynamic sector.

The consequence of a stagnant domestic environment is that skilled people leave. Fiji's exposure to skilled emigration is well documented: one 2024 academic study estimates that more than 90,000 Fijians will have migrated to Australia by the end of 2025, at an average of over 10,000 a year, and Fiji's Higher Education Commission has publicly described brain drain as a serious concern for the workforce. The evidence base is set out in Annex A.

I should fairly note a well-regarded counter-argument. Research using Fiji as a natural experiment (Chand and Clemens, 2008) found that the prospect of emigration can actually raise investment in tertiary education, so that the domestic stock of skilled people rises rather than falls — a 'beneficial brain drain'. I do not dispute the finding, but I would answer it directly: that benefit only converts into a national ICT industry if there is a domestic environment in which firms can survive and to which professionals can return. Without that environment, the training is real but the industry never forms, and the gain accrues offshore. Building that environment is precisely what this treaty should be steered to do.

That such an environment is achievable in Fiji is not theoretical. The locally founded fintech Sole — supported by the Australian- and New Zealand-backed Market Development Facility, licensed by the Reserve Bank of Fiji, and now serving tens of thousands of Fijians — demonstrates that well-directed support can grow a Fijian-owned digital business rather than import one. That case is set out in Annex B, and I return to it as a model in Section 6.

How the Vuvale Union engages Fiji's ICT sector

The Vuvale Union does not treat digital and technological questions as peripheral. Several of its provisions bear directly on the concerns above. The full mapping is at Annex D; the key provisions are these.

Economic integration

Article 3(2) commits the Parties to "integrate their economies and deepen links between their peoples". Integration with an economy many times larger than Fiji's carries an inherent asymmetry: without deliberate measures to build local capability, integration can mean Fiji consuming Australian services rather than developing its own. Article 3(4) recognises that economic growth requires "resilient infrastructure", rules-based investment and "quality education" — the very ingredients whose local development I am urging.

The digital economy and secure systems

Article 3(3)(b) commits the Parties to support "the transition to a digital economy", and Article 3(5) recognises that this transition "requires safe and secure digital infrastructure and systems". The public funding package includes FJ$146.3 million for digital transformation (Annex C). The fair question for the Committee is how much of that spend will be delivered by, and retained within, Fijian firms, and whether the infrastructure it funds — including data centres — will be Fijian-owned and Fijian-operated.

Mobility

Article 3(3)(c) commits the Parties to deepen "cultural and people linkages, including through mobility", and Article 3(7) to "enhancing mobility settings". The package operationalises this through expanded visitor stays of up to four months, five-year multiple-entry business visas, and FJ$46 million to support Fijian students to study at Australian universities from 2029. These are valuable opportunities. They also carry a risk I address in Section 5: enhanced mobility, without measures to bring skills back, can accelerate the loss of the very professionals Fiji's ICT sector needs.

Critical infrastructure and third-party engagement

Article 4(5) commits the Parties to protect critical infrastructure and technology which, if "destroyed, degraded, or rendered unavailable", would affect their security interests, and Article 4(6) defines that infrastructure expansively to include telecommunications, digital, aviation and energy infrastructure, artificial intelligence, cyberspace and quantum computing.

Article 4(2)(b) commits the Parties to engage third parties in the critical-infrastructure and security sectors "in a manner that… protects and strengthens" their security. Fiji is now assuming treaty-level obligations to protect a very broad class of critical technology, including through a new, publicly announced cyber-secure ICT Border Management System. Article 4(2)(b) is the textual basis for insisting that such systems be procured on terms that protect Fiji's control over them — a point I develop in Recommendation 2.

Inclusive development and the Work Plan

Article 5(1)(d) commits the Parties to "inclusive and resilient development", and Articles 6 and 7 establish the Vuvale Forum and the Vuvale Bukmak, the latter charged with developing and overseeing a Vuvale Union Work Plan for phased implementation. 'Inclusive' development is measurable only if implementation is transparent about how much value is created and retained in Fiji. The Work Plan is the instrument through which every recommendation in this submission could be given effect.

The central risk: dependency, and the mobility paradox

My central concern is that investment of this scale, entering a stagnant domestic ecosystem without deliberate capability-building measures, will be captured by external providers. Data centres may be built and owned abroad; government systems may be supplied and maintained by foreign vendors on terms Fiji cannot freely alter; and the digital spend may flow largely to Australian contractors. The result would be a modernised but dependent Fiji — dependency dressed as development. Fiji's experience with proprietary, vendor-controlled government systems already illustrates how difficult and costly such dependence is to unwind once established, which is why the terms on which the new Border Management System is procured matter so much now, at the outset.

A second, related risk is what I would call the mobility paradox. The treaty rightly expands opportunities for Fijians to travel, work and study abroad, and directs FJ$46 million to sending students to Australian universities. But mobility that flows in one direction, unaccompanied by any mechanism to bring skills home, does not relieve brain drain — it can deepen it. An investment that trains Fiji's brightest and then offers them easier settlement abroad may, on current sector conditions, subsidise their departure. The question the Work Plan must answer is simple: what brings the skills back?

One further fact sharpens both risks. Australia has stated publicly that the package is not additional spending — it is drawn from its existing development-assistance programme (Annex C). Because the money is largely reallocated rather than new, its power to transform Fiji's ecosystem depends even more heavily on how it is directed. Reallocated funding delivered through the same external channels will reproduce the same outcomes; the same funding directed toward local capability could change the sector's trajectory. The lever is direction, not quantum.

The opportunity: the enabled-capability model

The constructive path is already visible in Fiji. The Sole case (Annex B) shows Australian and New Zealand support being used to enable a Fijian-founded, locally owned, domestically

regulated digital business, rather than to import a foreign one. That is the distinction that matters. Support that backs Fijian firms, Fijian ownership and Fijian skills builds a sector; support that substitutes foreign capacity for local effort hollows it out.

The Vuvale Union can be implemented on the Sole model at scale. Directing a defined share of the digital and skills funding toward Fijian ICT firms, startups and cybersecurity businesses, toward Fijian-owned infrastructure, and toward the growth of ICT education in Fiji, would turn the partnership from a source of dependency into an engine of capability. That is the outcome I ask the Committee to help secure.

Recommendations

I respectfully offer the following recommendations for the Committee's consideration. They are directed at the implementation of the Vuvale Union, not at whether it should be ratified, and each could be given effect through the Vuvale Union Work Plan.

1. **Build local-capability targets into the Work Plan.** Recommend that the Vuvale Union Work Plan include measurable targets for local content, local participation and Fijian ownership in the digital (FJ$146.3m) and infrastructure components, with those targets published.

2. **Attach data-sovereignty and vendor-exit conditions to government digital systems.** Recommend that the new ICT Border Management System, and other government digital infrastructure funded under the partnership, be procured on terms that secure Fiji's control — source-code or intellectual-property access or escrow, data residency within Fiji, and a demonstrated ability to operate and restore the systems without the original vendor.

3. **Pair mobility and education funding with retention mechanisms.** Recommend that the FJ$46m student-access funding and the expanded visa arrangements be matched with explicit return-and-retention measures — for example return-service or bonding pathways, remote-work-from-Fiji arrangements, and structured diaspora-linkage schemes — so the investment grows Fiji's skill stock rather than depleting it.

4. **Direct a defined share of funding to Fijian ICT firms and education.** Recommend that a defined share of the digital and skills funding be directed to Fijian ICT firms, startups and cybersecurity businesses, and to the growth of ICT academic and vocational programmes in Fiji, on the enabled-capability model demonstrated by Sole.

5. **Require transparent public reporting on retained value.** Recommend that the Vuvale Forum and Bukmak publish regular reporting on how much of the funding is delivered by and retained within Fiji, so that the 'inclusive and resilient development' promised by Article 5(1)(d) can be measured rather than assumed.

6. **Advance the enabling domestic legislation in parallel.** Recommend that Fiji's criticalinfrastructure protection, cybersecurity and data-protection legislation be progressed alongside implementation, so that Fiji can meet its treaty obligations to protect critical infrastructure (Articles 4(5)–(6)) through its own legal instruments rather than relying on the partnership to supply them.

Conclusion

The Vuvale Union is neither inherently beneficial nor inherently dangerous to Fiji's ICT future. It is an instrument, and its effect will be decided by how it is implemented. Directed well, it can help build the industry, workforce and infrastructure Fiji needs to stand on its own. Directed poorly, it can modernise the surface while entrenching dependency beneath it and accelerating the loss of our most capable people. At the point of ratification, the Committee is well placed to steer it toward the first outcome. Capability built in Fiji today is what secures Fiji tomorrow.

I thank the Committee for the opportunity to contribute, and I am willing to expand on any part of this submission if that would assist.

Savenaca Siwatibau Waqa
Submitted in a personal capacity

Annex A Skilled migration and the ICT workforce

This annex sets out the evidence referred to in Section 3. Figures are presented as reported by their sources and, where they are estimates, are identified as such.

- Scale of emigration to Australia. A 2024 study on higher education and migration in Fiji estimates that more than 90,000 Fijians will have migrated to Australia by the end of 2025, at an average of over 10,000 per year. (The Significance of Higher Education in Facilitating Labour Market and Student Migration in Fiji, 2024.)
- Official concern. Fiji's Higher Education Commission has publicly described skilled emigration as a serious workforce concern, noting that departing professionals take their qualifications with them and leave gaps that are hard to fill. (The Fiji Times, 'Brain drain "a worry"', August 2024.)
- The counter-argument, fairly stated. Research using Fiji as a natural experiment found that the prospect of emigration can raise domestic investment in tertiary education, so that the home stock of skilled people rises — a 'beneficial brain drain'. (Chand and Clemens, 2008.)
- Why the counter-argument does not dissolve the problem. A larger stock of trained people benefits Fiji only if there is a domestic ICT sector in which they can work and to which emigrants can return. Where the sector is weak, the trained still leave and the gain is realised abroad. This is the gap the Work Plan should be steered to close.

Annex B Case study: the enabled-capability model (Sole)

Sole is offered as evidence that well-directed external support can build Fijian-owned digital capability rather than substitute for it.

- Origin and support. Sole is a Fijian-founded financial-technology business that partnered with the Market Development Facility, a programme supported by the Australian and New Zealand governments, to widen access to digital financial services in Fiji and the Pacific.
- Domestic regulation. After a six-month period in the Reserve Bank of Fiji's regulatory sandbox, Sole was granted a Payment Service Provider licence by the Reserve Bank of Fiji in July 2023, bringing it under domestic regulatory supervision.
- Reach and recognition. Sole now serves tens of thousands of registered Fijian members (reported at over 29,000 in 2025), has built a last-mile network through a partnership with Post Fiji, and placed second at the 2025 AFI Inclusive Fintech Showcase.
- Why it is the model. The support enabled a Fijian-owned, domestically regulated firm to grow — keeping ownership, skills and value in Fiji. Applied to the Vuvale Union's digital and skills funding, the same principle would build the ICT sector rather than import it.

Annex C The Vuvale Union funding package (public figures)

The figures below are drawn from public reporting of the package announced at the signing on 6 July 2026 and from Australian Government statements. They are reproduced to inform the Committee's consideration; individual line items should be confirmed against the official Work Plan.

Component	Amount (FJ$)	Notes
Total package (10 years)	> 1.5 billion	~1.05b in grants + ~550m in concessional loans
Policing / transnational crime	284 million	Includes anti-drug and organised-crime measures
Infrastructure (ports, flood)	778 million	Part grant, part concessional loan
Health (incl. HIV response)	158 million	
Digital transformation	146.3 million	Data centres, digital skills
Economic resilience	57.5 million	Reported publicly under economic resilience
Student access to Australian universities	46 million	From 2029
Sports / cultural and faith links	35m / 15.5m	

Two points of context bear on the argument in this submission:

- Not additional spending. Australia has publicly stated that the package is drawn from its existing development-assistance programme and is not additional to funding already provided for in its May 2026 budget. (Development Policy Centre; Fiji Sun, July 2026.)
- Conditional on ratification. Australian officials have advised that the funding and other provisions commence only after Fiji's Parliament ratifies the treaty, which is why the present scrutiny stage is the decision point at which implementation can be shaped. (Fiji Sun, 2026.)
- Border Management System. Australia has publicly committed to delivering a 'modern, cyber-secure ICT Border Management System', and to funding container-screening at Lautoka and Suva ports. (Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, media release.)

Annex D Treaty provisions relied upon

The table maps the Vuvale Union provisions cited in this submission to their ICT-sector implication. Wording is paraphrased except for short quoted phrases; the treaty text is authoritative.

Provision	What it provides (paraphrased)	ICT-sector implication

Art 3(2)	Integrate the Parties' economies and deepen links between peoples	Asymmetric integration risks consumption over local production unless capability is built
Art 3(3)(b), 3(5)	Support transition to a digital economy, which 'requires safe and secure digital infrastructure and systems'	Basis to ask who builds, owns and secures the funded digital infrastructure
Art 3(3)(c), 3(7)	Deepen people linkages 'including through mobility' and enhance mobility settings	Mobility without return mechanisms can accelerate ICT brain drain
Art 3(4)	Growth requires resilient infrastructure, rules-based investment and quality education	The ingredients of a domestic ICT sector — to be built in Fiji
Art 4(2)(b)	Engage third parties in critical infrastructure 'in a manner that… protects and strengthens' security	Textual basis for data-sovereignty and vendor-exit conditions
Art 4(5)–(6)	Protect critical infrastructure and technology; definition includes telecoms, digital, AI, cyberspace, quantum	Treaty-level duty to protect; presupposes domestic CIP / cyber / data law
Art 5(1)(d)	Deepen investment to support 'inclusive and resilient development'	'Inclusive' is measurable only with transparency on retained value
Art 6, 7, 11	Vuvale Forum and Bukmak; Bukmak develops and oversees the Work Plan; supplementary instruments	The Work Plan is where every recommendation here can be given effect

Sources

Fiji–Australia Vuvale Union, signed 6 July 2026 (treaty text).

Ocean of Peace Alliance / Veitacini Treaty, signed 6 July 2026 (treaty text).

The Fiji Times, 'Fiji to receive over $1.5B in Australian grants and concessional loans', July 2026. Fijivillage, coverage of the Vuvale Union signing and funding breakdown, July 2026.

Fiji Sun, 'Australia commits $146m to Fiji's digital transformation', 2026; and 'Aust's $1.57b Vuvale funding awaits parliamentary ratification', 2026.

Development Policy Centre (Devpolicy), July 2026 aid news.

Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, media release, 'Australia and Fiji to elevate Vuvale Partnership'. The Fiji Times, 'Revolutionising financial services' (Sole), August 2023; FBC News and Alliance for Financial Inclusion coverage of Sole, 2025.

The Fiji Times, 'Brain drain "a worry"', August 2024.

'The Significance of Higher Education in Facilitating Labour Market and Student Migration in Fiji', 2024. Chand, S. and Clemens, M., 'Skilled emigration and skill creation: a quasi-experiment' (Fiji), 2008.

Mr. James Sowane

34 Qanville Estate

NADI

02nd October, 2026

Hon. Lenora Qereqeretabua

Chairperson

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

Committees Unit

Parliament of the Republic of Fiji

Constitution Avenue,

SUVA

Dear Hon. Madam Chair,

Re: Personal Submission to the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union

Ni Cola Vina. Humble greetings from Nadi and I take this opportunity to thank you and your Honorable Committee members for inviting written submissions to the above-stated treaty.

Purpose of my submission

I respectfully request that the Fiji–Australia Vuvale Union include a clear commitment to a **Vuvale Education Fee Rate** for Fijian students attending Australian high schools and tertiary institutions.

This rate should place eligible Fijian students on the same tuition-fee basis as comparable local Australian students, rather than the standard international fee schedule which is the current practice.

The Vuvale Education Fee Rate is to be applicable to both (i) Privately funded students plus (ii) Fijian students on Fijian Government scholarships. Only students born in Fiji are to be eligible for the proposed discounted education rate and the Honorable Committee can further develop checks to ensure the system is not abused.

I also request a dedicated pathway that would enable both privately funded and, scholarship Fijian students who graduate from eligible Australian tertiary courses at the Vuvale Education Fee Rate to apply for a three-year graduate work experience visa.

This would enable them to apply their qualifications in Australian companies and public agencies to learn the standards and expectations of an advanced economy and bring those experiences back to Fiji.

In my humble view, the above proposal would be aligned with and achieve the stated objectives of Articles 2 and Article 3 respectively of the Vuvale Union.

Personal Experience

I am blessed to have been born and raised in a family and community in the village of Tubou, Lakeba, Lau that places great emphasis and priority on Education which is a common trait for communities in the maritime islands.

My mother never worked a formal job ever in her life yet, she made and sold sandwiches, cakes, pies and all other needs that she had identified, to the Government workers based in Lakeba.

My late father was a copra farmer who toiled tirelessly with my mother to send their five (5) children to the best education they could afford. My two sisters attended Adi Cakobau and Nasinu Secondary School respectively and my two older brothers and I all attended Marist Brothers High School.

In addition to our tuition fees, my parents worked extremely hard for our boarding fees.

I was fortunate to be a recipient of the New Zealand Overseas Development Assistance scholarship for my tertiary education at Lincoln University, Christchurch and the Fijian Affairs Board Scholarship that covered my boarding and living costs.

Upon graduation in 1993, I returned to Fiji in 1994 to serve my bond and gained my first employment experience with the Fiji Visitors Bureau (now Tourism Fiji). 32years on, I am still serving and doing my part for our beloved Fiji in the tourism industry.

The values of Education placed on me by my parents continue to inspire my wife and I's commitment to offering the best education that we can afford for our three (3) children as private overseas students.

Our eldest daughter attended high school in New Zealand and graduated from Auckland University of Technology. Our son attended high school in New Zealand and opted to return to Fiji to pursue a career in aviation.

Our youngest child is currently enrolled at Queensland University of Technology and we are committed to her AUD45,000 per annum tuition PLUS Accommodation, insurance and living expenses, which by the end of her three year course, we would be investing close to AUD 200,000.

Our three children were/are subjected to the same international student fees being paid by students from countries of much larger economies.

The current tuition fee gap

For a quick reference, I used AI to tabulate 2026 examples to show the difference between local and international tuition to emphasize my point.

All amounts are Australian dollars per student per year. They are illustrations, not a national average or a statement that every Fijian student pays the same amount.

2026 example	Local Australian tuition basis	Standard international tuition	Annual difference
NSW government high school Years 7 to 10	A$0 tuition for citizens and permanent residents	A$18,000	A$18,000
NSW government high school Years 11 and 12	A$0 tuition for citizens and permanent residents	A$20,500	A$20,500
Deakin University Bachelor of Commerce	A$16,388 indicative student contribution in a Commonwealth Supported Place	A$45,800 indicative firstyear fee	A$29,412

To emphasize my point, I am copying an extract of my youngest daughter's fee structure for her 3-year Commerce degree program at Queensland University of Technology and these are just for tuition and does not include her accommodation, stationery, insurances, living expenses etc :

B. COURSE DETAILS

Provider:	Queensland University of Technology (QUT) [00213J] (trading as: Queensland University of Technology) Telephone: 0731380513, Fax: 0731383529 Email: qut.intcompliance@qut.edu.au
Course:	Bachelor of Business [003491G]
Course Level:	Bachelor Degree
Course Start Date:	23/02/2026
Course End Date:	31/12/2028
Initial Pre-Paid Tuition Fee:	$AU 22,500
Other Pre-Paid Non-Tuition Fee:	$AU 2,597
Total Tuition Fee:	$AU 135,000

Vuvale in its True Spirit

A genuine Vuvale gesture would be for the Australian Government to work out an affordable discounted rate that would inspire/encourage more Fijian parents to send their children to Australia for their high school and tertiary education.

In regard to Fijian Scholarships for studies in Australia, the anticipated significant savings through a Vuvale Education Fee Rate would enable opportunities for more students to apply for placement opportunities.

A Vuvale Education Rate Fee would remove a major tuition barrier, and it would encourage more Fijian parents to invest in the best education and work experience for their children in Australia.

Upon her graduation from Auckland University of Technology, my eldest daughter was offered by New Immigraton the opportunity to remain and work in New Zealand for three (3) years to gain work experience. She is now part of our family business and we can see and truly appreciate the positive impact of her work experience in New Zealand.

I urge the Australian Government to consider post-graduate work experiences for both private and scholarship Fiji students.

Conclusion

Vuvale means Family. I believe that relationship should be reflected in the opportunities to be made available through the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union to our young people.

Fijian families including mine, are currently levied the standard international tuition schedules that is the same for students from wealthier developed economies.

A common international price does not recognise differences in families' ability to pay or the special relationship Fiji and Australia are seeking to strengthen.

I do sincerely hope that my humble submission will initiate discussions towards a positive outcome for the betterment of our children and future work-force.

Vinaka sara vakalevu.

Sincerely,



James Sowane

Email: james@tewaka.com.fj / Mobile: 9925175

Mr. Jone Saqayalo

SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

Fiji–Australia Vuvale Union

Strengthening Fiji Professional Participation, Local Capability, Locally Appropriate Standards and Sustainable Development Outcomes

Submitted to:

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

Parliament of the Republic of Fiji **Treaty under consideration:** Fiji–Australia Vuvale Union

Fiji–Australia Vuvale Union

1. PURPOSE OF SUBMISSION

This submission supports the objectives of the Fiji–Australia Vuvale Union and proposes enhancements to its implementation to strengthen the participation of suitably qualified Fiji professionals, consultants and businesses in Australian-funded programmes, projects and consultancy assignments undertaken in

Fiji.

The submission does not propose lowering Australian Government, DFAT, technical, fiduciary, governance, procurement or professional standards.

Rather, it proposes that implementation of the Vuvale Union should increasingly operate according to the principle:

Australian accountability standards + Fiji capability + Fiji context + shared opportunity + sustainable local outcomes.

The Vuvale relationship should not only strengthen government-to-government cooperation.

It should also create practical opportunities for Fiji professionals and businesses to participate in the economic, institutional and technical activities generated through the partnership.

Where work is substantially undertaken in Fiji, suitably qualified Fiji consultants and businesses should have a genuine opportunity to compete for, lead and win consultancy assignments on merit.

2. WHY THIS MATTERS TO FIJI

Fiji now possesses a substantial professional workforce across:

- government;
- statutory authorities;
- state-owned enterprises;
- private companies;
- universities;
- civil society;
- professional services;
- independent consulting; and the Fiji diaspora.

Many Fiji professionals possess:

- undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications;
- Australian, New Zealand and international qualifications;
- international professional certifications;
- extensive Fiji Government experience;
- private-sector experience;
- donor-funded programme experience;
- regional Pacific experience;
- Australian and New Zealand professional experience;
- technical expertise;
- senior management experience;
- and strong understanding of Fiji's institutional and cultural environment.

Some Fiji professionals have spent significant periods working internationally before returning to Fiji, establishing Fiji businesses or providing consulting services in Fiji and the wider Pacific.

Consequently, the distinction should no longer simply be:

International expertise versus **Local expertise.** Fiji increasingly has professionals capable of providing:

International-standard expertise combined with Fiji knowledge, cultural understanding and local implementation capability.

This should be recognised as an important national asset.

3. THE OPPORTUNITY CREATED BY AUSTRALIAN DEVELOPMENT INVESTMENT

Australia is one of Fiji's largest and most important development partners.

Australian-funded programmes involve substantial expenditure across areas including:

- governance;
- institutional strengthening;
- infrastructure;
- health;
- education;
- economic development;
- climate resilience;
- digital transformation;
- ICT;
- cybersecurity;
- monitoring and evaluation;
- procurement;
- finance;
- engineering;
- organisational reform;
- project management;
- business process improvement;
- research;
- technical assistance;
- and professional advisory services.

These programmes create significant professional-services opportunities.

The Fiji–Australia Vuvale Union therefore provides an opportunity to ensure that Australian development investment produces two forms of value simultaneously:

Development

outcomes and

Development of Fiji capability.

The question should therefore be:

How can Australian-funded investment in Fiji also contribute to building a sustainable Fiji professionalservices industry and institutional capability?

4. LOCALISATION SHOULD INCLUDE PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

Localisation should extend throughout the development lifecycle.

Consultation

Fiji stakeholders help define the problem.

Design

Fiji professionals participate in designing solutions.

Procurement

Fiji consultants receive realistic opportunities to compete.

Implementation

Fiji professionals participate substantially in delivery.

Monitoring

Fiji institutions participate in determining whether outcomes are being achieved.

Evaluation

Fiji expertise contributes to evaluating results.

Knowledge Transfer

Skills, tools and institutional knowledge remain in Fiji after external consultants leave.

Localisation should therefore mean more than consulting Fiji stakeholders while most higher-value analysis, design and advisory work continues to be externally delivered.

5. THE PROCUREMENT CHALLENGE

Australian-funded consultancy assignments understandably require strong standards relating to:

- technical competence;
- governance;
- safeguarding;
- financial management;
- reporting;
- procurement;
- risk;
- monitoring and evaluation;
- quality assurance;
- project management; and accountability.

These standards should remain.

However, local participation can unintentionally be constrained when procurement requirements reflect the historical characteristics of large international consulting organisations rather than the actual requirements of the assignment. Examples can include requirements for:

- extensive previous DFAT contracts;
- substantial donor-specific experience;
- large corporate turnover;
- significant insurance coverage;
- large multidisciplinary teams;

• extensive international references;

- previous experience with specific donor systems;
- or experience managing contracts significantly larger than the assignment being tendered. These requirements may be appropriate for large and complex programmes.

They may not always be proportionate for smaller specialist consultancy assignments.

This can create a circular barrier:

A Fiji consultant cannot obtain donor experience because previous donor experience is required to obtain the first donor contract.

The Vuvale Union provides an opportunity to address this barrier while maintaining professional standards.

6. PROPOSED EQUIVALENT CAPABILITY PRINCIPLE

Where an assignment is substantially delivered in Fiji, procurement documentation should allow Fiji consultants to demonstrate capability through equivalent professional evidence.

For example, instead of requiring:

"Five years' previous DFAT consultancy experience."

consider:

"Demonstrated experience delivering comparable government, donor, institutional or private-sector assignments under appropriate professional, governance and reporting standards. DFAT experience is desirable; equivalent relevant experience will also be considered." This maintains quality while increasing competition.

7. RECOGNISE INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE OF FIJI PROFESSIONALS

A Fiji consultant should not lose recognition of international experience simply because they are now bidding through a Fiji-based consultancy.

Assessment should recognise professional experience obtained in:

- Fiji;
- Australia;
- New Zealand;
- other Pacific countries;
- international organisations;
- multinational businesses;
- government;
- regulated industries;

• and development programmes.

A Fiji professional with extensive experience across Fiji, Australia, New Zealand or internationally can potentially provide:

International professional capability

Fiji institutional knowledge

Cultural understanding

Local networks

Implementation

knowledge.

That combination should be recognised during evaluation.

8. FAIR AND COMPETENCY-BASED CONSULTANT ASSESSMENT

Another important issue is how consultant capability is assessed during recruitment and interviews.

Fiji consultants should not be disproportionately penalised because they cannot provide an immediate textbook definition of a technical term, methodology or concept where their overall professional experience and responses demonstrate that they understand and have successfully applied the relevant capability.

There is an important difference between:

Knowing the textbook definition of a

concept and

Demonstrating the ability to apply that concept successfully in a real

organisation. For example, a consultant may not provide the exact expected definition of:

- business process improvement;
- benefits realisation;
- theory of change;
- stakeholder mapping;
- process governance;
- change management;
- results framework;
- or another professional concept.

However, the same consultant may demonstrate through previous assignments that they have successfully:

- identified organisational problems;
- facilitated stakeholder consultations;
- mapped processes;

- undertaken root-cause analysis;
- developed requirements;
- redesigned services;
- implemented controls;
- prepared SOPs;
- managed organisational change;
- developed performance measures;
- supported implementation;
- and achieved measurable improvements.

Such experience provides material evidence of professional competence.

9. ASSESS THE WHOLE EVIDENCE BASE

Consultant selection should use a balanced assessment incorporating:

Qualifications

Relevant experience

Demonstrated practical application

Methodology

Interview performance

Fiji contextual

knowledge Previous

results References.

An isolated inability to recall a particular definition or donor-specific terminology should not automatically outweigh substantial evidence of professional capability.

This is particularly relevant where Fiji professionals have developed their expertise through government, industry, Australia, New Zealand, regional organisations and practical implementation rather than through terminology associated with a particular donor organisation.

10. INTERVIEWS SHOULD TEST APPLICATION

Technical questions remain important.

However, consultancy interviews should place greater emphasis on practical application.

Instead of relying heavily on:

"Define

business process improvement." an

interview could ask:

"Describe an organisation where you identified an inefficient business process. How did you identify the problem, what analysis did you undertake, what changes did you recommend, how were they implemented and what was achieved?" Rather than simply asking:

"What is benefits realisation?"

ask:

"How would you determine whether this Fiji programme actually delivered the benefits it was established to achieve?"

These questions provide stronger evidence of whether the consultant can actually undertake the assignment.

This recommendation does not suggest removing technical questions where precise knowledge is essential to areas such as safety, legislation, engineering, financial controls, safeguarding, cybersecurity or other specialist requirements.

The principle is proportionality and relevance.



11. PROPORTIONATE CORPORATE REQUIREMENTS

Corporate requirements should correspond with:

Contract value

Actual risk

Complexity

Professional liability.

A relatively small technical consultancy should not necessarily require the same:

- corporate turnover;
- insurance;
- staffing;
- financial capacity;
- systems;
- and administrative infrastructure as a multimillion-dollar programme-management contract.

Proportionate requirements would enable smaller Fiji professional firms to progressively build experience and capacity.

12. SEPARATE MANDATORY FROM DESIRABLE REQUIREMENTS

Tender documentation should clearly distinguish between:

Mandatory requirements

Capabilities genuinely required to perform the assignment safely and

successfully. and

Desirable requirements

Experience or attributes that strengthen a proposal but should not automatically exclude otherwise capable applicants.

For example:

Previous DFAT experience — desirable

may be more appropriate for some assignments than:

Previous DFAT experience — mandatory.

13. ESTABLISH FIJI CONSULTANT CATEGORIES

Australian-funded programmes could recognise different provider categories, for example:

Category A — Fiji Individual Consultant

Category B — Fiji Micro/Small Consulting Firm

Category C — Fiji Specialist Professional Firm

Category D — Fiji–Australia Joint Venture

Category E — International Consulting Firm

Not every assignment requires a Category E provider.

Many assignments involving:

- process improvement;
- stakeholder engagement;
- policy analysis;
- business analysis;
- training;
- organisational diagnostics;
- research;
- project support;

- SOP development;
- and institutional strengthening may be deliverable by Fiji providers.

14. ESTABLISH FIJI PROFESSIONAL AND TECHNICAL PANELS

Australian-funded programmes could establish transparent pre-qualified Fiji consultant panels covering areas such as:

- business analysis;
- business process improvement;
- governance;
- project management;
- ICT;
- digital transformation;
- cybersecurity;
- monitoring and evaluation;
- finance;
- accounting;
- procurement;
- engineering;
- environment;
- climate;
- health;
- education;
- infrastructure;
- economics;
- legal advisory;
- organisational change;
- communications;
- facilitation;
- research;
- and cultural advisory.

Consultants could undertake appropriate due diligence once and subsequently compete for individual task-based assignments.

Importantly, panels should increase access rather than become another barrier.

Panel requirements themselves should therefore be proportionate and accessible to capable Fiji professionals.

15. UNBUNDLE LARGE CONSULTANCY PACKAGES WHERE PRACTICAL

Large bundled contracts naturally favour large international firms.

Where commercially and operationally practical, major programmes could divide work into specialist packages.

Instead of a single contract covering:

Programme Design + Business Analysis + ICT + Organisational Reform + Communications + Training + Monitoring + Change Management some workstreams could be competitively offered separately.

This would create opportunities for specialist Fiji providers while retaining overall programme governance where necessary.

16. CREATE A FIJI CONSULTANCY CAPABILITY PATHWAY

The Vuvale Union could encourage a progression pathway:

Emerging Fiji Consultant

↓

Specialist Consultant

↓

Lead Consultant

↓

Fiji Consulting Firm

↓

Prime Contractor

↓

Pacific Regional Consulting Provider

This would allow Australian development investment to help build Fiji businesses capable of eventually exporting professional services throughout the Pacific.

17. GENUINE FIJI–AUSTRALIA PARTNERSHIPS

Where international expertise is genuinely required, tenders could encourage substantive partnerships.

Possible structures include:

International Lead + Fiji

Technical Lead or

Fiji Lead + Australian/International

Specialist. Fiji consultants should not automatically be restricted to:

- introductions;
- translation;
- meeting arrangements;
- logistics; data collection; or note-taking.

Where appropriately qualified, they should participate in:

- methodology;
- analysis;
- design;
- recommendations;
- report writing;
- presentations;
- implementation;
- monitoring;
- and decision support.

18. KNOWLEDGE AND CAPABILITY TRANSFER

International consulting assignments should, where appropriate, include a:

Fiji Capability and Knowledge Transfer

Plan This could identify:

- Fiji counterparts;
- skills being transferred;
- mentoring arrangements;
- joint deliverables;
- tools and templates;
- training;
- progressive transfer of responsibility; and transition arrangements.

The question at project completion should include:

"What professional and institutional capability remains in Fiji because this project occurred?"

19. FAIR PROFESSIONAL REMUNERATION

Localisation should not become a mechanism for obtaining equivalent professional expertise at substantially discounted rates simply because the consultant is Fijian or Fiji-based.

Professional remuneration should appropriately recognise:

- qualifications;
- expertise;
- experience;
- professional responsibility;
- assignment complexity;
- international experience;
- specialist knowledge; business overheads;
- and market conditions.

Localisation should mean local opportunity and capability development, not simply lower labour cost.



20. FIJI CONTEXT SHOULD BE A SCORED CAPABILITY

For Fiji assignments, evaluation criteria should appropriately recognise:

Fiji Institutional Knowledge

Understanding government, SOEs, statutory authorities and local governance.

Cultural Competence

Ability to work appropriately within Fiji's diverse communities and institutions.

Stakeholder Knowledge

Understanding relevant networks and decision-making arrangements.

Local Implementation Capability

Understanding what can realistically be implemented and sustained within Fiji.

Geographic Understanding

Recognition of the very different service-delivery environments across:

- Suva;
- urban centres;
- rural communities; maritime islands; remote locations.

These are professional capabilities, not merely "local knowledge".



21. LOCAL OUTCOMES, KPIs AND STANDARDS

A further important consideration is how Australian-funded programmes operating in Fiji define success.

DFAT understandably requires robust:

- accountability;
- monitoring;
- evaluation;
- safeguards;
- financial stewardship;
- evidence;
- development effectiveness; and value for money.

These requirements should continue.

However:

DFAT-funded should not automatically mean Australian-shaped delivery.

Where a programme operates in Fiji, its outcomes, KPIs and implementation standards should also reflect Fiji's:

- laws;
- regulations;
- government priorities;
- institutions;
- workforce;
- culture;
- geography;
- infrastructure;
- resources;
- service-delivery realities;
- and community expectations.

22. FIJI-FRIENDLY PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORKS

Programmes should avoid applying Australian benchmarks automatically where those benchmarks may be inappropriate to Fiji conditions.

Fiji-based outcome frameworks should consider:

- Fiji Government priorities;
- locally recognised service standards;
- Fiji legislation;
- institutional responsibilities;

- local workforce capacity;
- available technology;
- local budgets;
- rural service delivery;
- maritime service delivery;
- transport constraints;
- connectivity;
- language;
- cultural decision-making;
- local administrative capacity;
- and realistic implementation timelines. The key question should not only be:

"Did the programme meet the donor KPI?" It should also be:

"Did the programme improve the Fiji institution, service or community outcome in a way that Fiji can realistically maintain after donor support ends?"

23. DUAL ACCOUNTABILITY MODEL

A useful approach would combine:

DFAT Accountability Measures

covering:

- financial stewardship;
- safeguards;
- programme delivery;
- development effectiveness;
- risk;
- governance;
- value for money. with:

Fiji Outcome Measures

covering:

- service improvement;
- institutional performance;
- operational efficiency;
- customer/citizen outcomes;
- workforce capability;
- accessibility;
- sustainability;

• local ownership.

The two should complement rather than compete with each other.

24. LOCALLY DESIGNED KPIs

Where appropriate, major Fiji programmes should develop operational KPIs jointly with relevant Fiji institutions during mobilisation.

A useful hierarchy is:

Strategic Outcome

What Fiji ultimately wants improved.

↓

Service Outcome

What citizens, businesses or communities experience differently.

↓

Operational KPI

What the Fiji organisation can realistically measure.

↓

Capability KPI

Whether Fiji personnel can sustain the change.

↓

Donor Accountability KPI

Whether funding and development obligations have been met.

This creates a more meaningful performance framework.

25. MEASURE OUTCOMES, NOT JUST CONSULTANT OUTPUTS

For example, a business-process improvement project should not be considered successful merely because:

- 20 processes were documented;
- 15 SOPs were produced; 30 employees attended training;
- and a final report was delivered. Those are outputs.

The more important Fiji outcomes may include:

- reduced processing times;
- fewer unnecessary approvals;

- reduced duplication;
- fewer repeat customer visits;
- improved access outside Suva;
- increased compliance with processes;
- improved staff capability;
- reduced rework;
- clearer accountability;
- improved customer satisfaction;
- and continued use of the improved process after consultants leave. This moves evaluation from:

"What did the consultant deliver?" toward:

"What became better in Fiji because the programme occurred?"



26. USE FIJI STANDARDS WHERE APPROPRIATE

Australian technical standards may sometimes be required because of:

- safety;
- engineering;
- fiduciary requirements;
- cybersecurity;
- interoperability;
- international obligations;
- or genuine technical necessity.

Where this is the case, they should be maintained.

However, external standards should not automatically be applied simply because they represent the normal Australian way of undertaking the work.

Projects should ask:

"Is this standard genuinely necessary, or can an appropriate Fiji standard achieve the required outcome more sustainably?"

Where appropriate, Fiji laws, standards, systems and institutional processes should be the starting point.



27. DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY AFTER DONOR FUNDING

A project may technically succeed during donor funding but fail once external resources are removed.

Every substantial programme should therefore consider:

Can Fiji afford to operate this solution?

Can Fiji maintain it?

Do Fiji personnel have the required skills?

Are replacement parts/services available?

Can the Fiji institution measure the KPI itself?

Does the operating model fit local staffing?

Does it work outside major urban areas?

Can it function without permanent external consultants?

A successful development project should progressively reduce dependency rather than create new dependency.

28. FIJI–AUSTRALIA PROFESSIONAL MOBILITY

The Vuvale relationship should support professional mobility in both directions.

It should not only involve Fiji workers travelling to Australia.

Fiji professionals should increasingly participate in:

- Australian-funded programmes;
- Pacific regional programmes;
- Australian consulting partnerships;
- technical exchanges;
- secondments;
- research;
- advisory panels;
- joint project teams.

This could eventually create a genuine:

Fiji–Australia Professional Community

29. FIJI PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MARKETPLACE

The Governments could eventually consider establishing a verified professional-services register.

Fiji professionals and consulting companies could record:

- qualifications;
- certifications;

• experience;

- specialisations; □ project history;
- international experience; □ sector knowledge; □ availability.

Australian-funded programmes could use the register for market sounding and competitive procurement.

30. LOCAL PARTICIPATION AS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Professional-services localisation should be recognised as economic development.

When Australian-funded programmes engage Fiji:

- consultants;
- engineers;
- accountants;
- technology companies;
- business analysts;
- researchers;
- project managers;
- trainers;
- professional firms, the expenditure can circulate through the Fiji economy.

Those businesses can:

- employ graduates;
- train junior professionals;
- pay taxes;
- invest;
- develop intellectual property;
- expand;
- and eventually export services.

Australian development expenditure therefore potentially creates a multiplier effect.

31. PROPOSED LOCAL PROFESSIONAL PARTICIPATION FRAMEWORK

The Vuvale implementation arrangements could establish a:

Fiji–Australia Local Professional Participation Framework The

Framework could contain:

1. Equivalent Capability Principle

Recognise comparable Fiji and international professional experience.

2. Competency-Based Assessment

Evaluate practical application, not textbook terminology alone.

3. Proportionate Procurement

Match requirements to actual assignment risk and value.

4. Local Market Testing

Determine whether suitable Fiji capability exists.

5. Fiji Consultant Panels

Create accessible pre-qualified specialist pools.

6. Contract Unbundling

Provide smaller specialist opportunities where practical.

7. Meaningful Partnerships

Ensure Fiji consultants undertake substantive professional work.

8. Knowledge Transfer

Measure capability remaining in Fiji.

9. Fiji-Friendly Outcomes

Use locally meaningful performance measures.

10. Sustainable Standards

Ensure solutions can be maintained within Fiji.



32. SUGGESTED PROCUREMENT HIERARCHY

For appropriate Fiji-based consultancy assignments:

FIRST

Can qualified Fiji capability competitively deliver the assignment?

↓

SECOND

Can a Fiji-led team deliver the assignment with specialised Australian/international support?

↓

THIRD

Can an international provider partner substantively with Fiji professionals?

↓

FOURTH

Where specialist capability is genuinely unavailable locally, procure internationally and include knowledge transfer where appropriate.

This does not guarantee contracts to Fiji consultants.

They must still compete on:

- competence;
- experience;
- methodology;
- quality;
- capacity; □ price;
- and results.

The objective is:

A FAIR OPPORTUNITY TO COMPETE.

33. MEASURE LOCALISATION

The Vuvale implementation framework could report annually on indicators such as:

- percentage of professional-services expenditure retained in Fiji;
- number of Fiji consultants contracted;
- number of Fiji lead consultants;
- number of Fiji consulting firms contracted;
- number of Fiji–Australian joint teams;
- number of Fiji SMEs progressing into larger assignments;
- value of contracts awarded to Fiji firms;
- knowledge-transfer outcomes;
- Fiji professionals trained/mentored;
- and Fiji companies subsequently winning regional assignments.

This would make localisation measurable rather than aspirational.

34. BENEFITS TO FIJI

The proposed approach could produce:

- stronger Fiji consulting businesses;

• professional employment;

- graduate opportunities;
- retention of professional fees in Fiji;
- stronger institutional capability;
- increased tax revenue;
- knowledge transfer;
- return of skilled diaspora professionals;
- improved professional standards;
- stronger private-sector capability;
- reduced dependency;
- and export of professional services throughout the Pacific.

35. BENEFITS TO AUSTRALIA

Greater Fiji participation could also provide Australia with:

- stronger contextual understanding;
- improved stakeholder relationships;
- reduced mobilisation costs;
- reduced travel costs;
- greater continuity;
- improved local implementation;
- stronger sustainability;
- improved knowledge transfer;
- reduced long-term dependency;
- stronger Fiji institutions;
- and greater public visibility of the practical benefits of the Vuvale relationship.

This therefore represents shared value rather than simply local preference.

36. WHAT THIS SUBMISSION IS NOT REQUESTING

This submission does not seek:

- automatic preference regardless of capability;
- guaranteed contracts;
- exclusion of Australian consultants;
- lower professional standards;
- weaker procurement;
- weaker accountability;
- political appointment of consultants; □ reduced safety requirements; □ or lower-quality

outcomes. It seeks:

FAIR **ACCESS**

PROPORTIONATE REQUIREMENTS

RECOGNITION OF EQUIVALENT CAPABILITY

COMPETENCY-BASED ASSESSMENT

LOCAL PARTICIPATION

FIJI-APPROPRIATE OUTCOMES SUSTAINABLE

CAPABILITY.



37. PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE

It is respectfully proposed that the Standing Committee consider recommending that:

Recommendation 1 — Local Professional Participation

The implementation arrangements under the Fiji–Australia Vuvale Union include measures to progressively increase the competitive participation of suitably qualified Fiji consultants, professionals and businesses in Australian-funded programmes and projects undertaken in Fiji.

Recommendation 2 — Equivalent Capability

Relevant Fiji government, private-sector, regional and international professional experience be recognised as equivalent evidence of capability where appropriate, rather than making previous DFAT contracting experience unnecessarily mandatory.

Recommendation 3 — Competency-Based Recruitment

Consultant recruitment and interviews give appropriate weight to demonstrated professional application, qualifications, experience and results, rather than disproportionately penalising otherwise capable candidates for inability to provide exact textbook or donor-specific definitions where terminology is not itself critical to the assignment.

Recommendation 4 — Proportionate Procurement

Insurance, turnover, staffing and corporate requirements be proportionate to the value, complexity and actual risk of the assignment.

Recommendation 5 — Fiji Professional Panels

Australian-funded programmes establish accessible Fiji professional and technical consultant panels where this improves procurement efficiency and local participation.

Recommendation 6 — Fiji–Australia Partnerships

International consulting firms be encouraged, where appropriate, to establish substantive partnerships with qualified Fiji professionals and firms.

Recommendation 7 — Knowledge Transfer

Significant international consultancy assignments include measurable Fiji capability and knowledgetransfer requirements where appropriate.

Recommendation 8 — Fiji-Friendly Outcomes and KPIs

Projects implemented in Fiji adopt outcome frameworks and KPIs jointly developed with relevant Fiji institutions and reflecting Fiji's legal, institutional, cultural, geographic and service-delivery context while satisfying legitimate Australian accountability requirements.

Recommendation 9 — Appropriate Local Standards

Fiji laws, standards, systems and institutional arrangements be used where they appropriately meet project objectives, rather than automatically importing Australian approaches where unnecessary.

Recommendation 10 — Sustainability

Project design explicitly assess whether Fiji institutions can financially, technically and operationally sustain solutions after external funding or technical assistance concludes.

Recommendation 11 — Localisation Measurement

Implementation arrangements report measurable indicators of Fiji professional participation, expenditure retained locally, capability transfer and progression of Fiji consulting firms.

Recommendation 12 — Regional Capability

The partnership support the development of Fiji professional firms capable of eventually exporting consulting and technical services throughout the Pacific.

38. PROPOSED WORDING FOR THE VUVALE IMPLEMENTATION WORK PLAN

The following could be considered:

"Australia and Fiji will progressively strengthen the participation of suitably qualified Fiji professionals, consultants and businesses in programmes, projects and technical-assistance activities undertaken in Fiji under the Vuvale Union, while maintaining appropriate technical, fiduciary, governance, safeguarding and procurement standards." This could be complemented by:

"Programmes undertaken in Fiji will, where appropriate, apply locally relevant outcome frameworks, performance indicators and implementation standards developed with Fiji institutions, with consideration given to Fiji's legal, institutional, cultural, geographic, economic and servicedelivery environment." And:

> *"Consultant selection will recognise demonstrated professional competence, relevant equivalent experience and practical application, with assessment criteria proportionate to the requirements and risks of the assignment."*

39. A SIMPLE TEST FOR FUTURE PROGRAMMES

For significant Australian-funded initiatives in Fiji, five questions could be asked.

1. LOCAL CAPABILITY

Could suitably qualified Fiji professionals undertake some or all of this work?

2. FAIR ACCESS

Do the procurement requirements allow them a realistic opportunity to compete?

3. LOCAL PARTICIPATION

Are Fiji professionals participating substantively in design, analysis and implementation?

4. LOCAL OUTCOME

Are the KPIs measuring improvements meaningful to Fiji?

5. SUSTAINABILITY

Will Fiji be able to continue the improvement when donor funding ends?

If the answer to several of these questions is "No", the programme should consider whether its localisation approach can be improved.

40. CLOSING SUBMISSION

The Fiji–Australia Vuvale Union provides an opportunity to deepen a relationship already built on strong historical, social, economic, security and people-to-people connections.

Its long-term success should also be demonstrated by the capability it leaves behind.

A Fiji engineer, accountant, business analyst, ICT specialist, researcher, project manager, health professional, governance adviser or consulting company that

possesses the necessary competence should be able to look at an Australian-funded consultancy opportunity being delivered in Fiji and reasonably conclude:

"If I can demonstrate that I have the skills, experience and capability to perform this work, I have a fair opportunity to compete for it."

Likewise, a Fiji institution receiving Australian-funded assistance should be able to say:

"The solution was developed with us, reflects our operating environment, measures outcomes that matter to Fiji, and can continue to work after the external consultants leave."

These two outcomes are closely connected.

Local consultants understand local institutions.

Local institutions help establish appropriate outcomes.

Locally relevant KPIs measure meaningful improvement.

Knowledge remains in Fiji.

Fiji capability becomes stronger.

Australian assistance therefore creates a longer-lasting return.

The objective should not be to choose between Australian expertise and Fiji expertise.

It should be to combine their strengths through the Vuvale relationship.

AUSTRALIAN STANDARDS

+

FIJI CAPABILITY

+

FIJI CONTEXT

+

FAIR COMPETITION

+

LOCAL OWNERSHIP

+

SUSTAINABLE OUTCOMES

=

A STRONGER VUVALE PARTNERSHIP

The desired long-term result is a Fiji that increasingly possesses the professional, institutional and commercial capability to design, implement and sustain its own development while continuing to work in genuine partnership with Australia.

That would be a practical expression of Vuvale: not simply assistance between two countries, but a partnership that builds capability, opportunity, mutual respect and shared prosperity.

Mr. Semesa Tuicolo

PUBLIC SUBMISSION
Fiji–Australia Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty)

To: Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence Parliament of the Republic of Fiji

I welcome the opportunity to make a public submission concerning the Fiji–Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty). I recognise the longstanding relationship between Fiji and Australia and the benefits that cooperation between the two countries can provide in areas including economic development, climate change, maritime security, disaster response, healthcare, education, cybersecurity, transnational crime and regional stability.

However, because these agreements create legally binding and long-term commitments, I believe Parliament must ensure that Fiji's sovereignty, independent decision-making and democratic accountability are fully protected.

Mutual defence obligations

Article 6 of the Veitacini Treaty provides that an armed attack on either Party within the Pacific would constitute a common danger and that each Party would act to meet that danger in accordance with its domestic processes. I respectfully request that Parliament clarify the practical meaning and limits of this obligation.

Visiting foreign forces

Article 7 provides for bilateral and multilateral visiting-forces agreements and arrangements. I recommend that Parliament require all such future agreements to be subject to appropriate parliamentary scrutiny and public transparency. They should clearly address jurisdiction, criminal responsibility, weapons, environmental obligations, compensation, taxation and financial responsibility.

Protection of Fiji's sovereignty

Both treaties recognise the sovereignty and independence of the Parties. However, Fiji Parliament's Written Analysis refers to “shared sovereignty as a capability multiplier.” I respectfully request that the Government clarify this terminology. The treaties should expressly confirm that cooperation does not transfer, delegate, pool or diminish the sovereign authority of the Republic of Fiji.

Third-party military and security arrangements

The Vuvale Union refers to third-party military or security bases, ongoing presences, arrangements or visits that could threaten or undermine collective security. I request clarification regarding the scope of this provision and whether it could restrict Fiji's ability to independently establish lawful relationships or agreements with other sovereign states. Fiji

should retain the right to conduct its foreign relations and security cooperation consistently with its laws and international obligations.

Integrated policing, defence and border protection

The Vuvale Union refers to strengthening security through integrated policing, defence and border protection. I request a clear definition of “integrated.” Cooperation and information sharing are understandable, but Fiji should not permit arrangements that could result in foreign authorities exercising governmental powers within Fiji without clear legal authority and democratic oversight.

Critical infrastructure and technology

The Vuvale Union covers ports, telecommunications, aviation, energy, cyberspace, artificial intelligence, quantum computing and other critical infrastructure. I recommend safeguards ensuring that cooperation does not result in the loss of Fijian control over critical infrastructure, sensitive data, communications systems or strategic national assets. Major arrangements should remain subject to Fiji's domestic laws and appropriate parliamentary oversight.

Dispute settlement

The treaties contain dispute-settlement provisions that prevent disputes from being referred to national or international courts or tribunals. I request that Parliament clarify how serious disputes involving sovereignty, national security or treaty interpretation will ultimately be resolved if the two governments cannot reach agreement.

Parliamentary oversight

Because these treaties are intended to operate indefinitely, I recommend that Parliament establish a mechanism for periodic review, including annual reporting, publication of major implementing agreements, parliamentary scrutiny of major defence and visiting-forces arrangements, and regular reporting on financial and national-security implications.

Economic benefits and accountability

I support cooperation that strengthens Fiji's economy, infrastructure, healthcare, education, climate resilience and employment opportunities. However, any financial or development assistance associated with the treaties should be transparent and should not create hidden obligations or excessive dependence. Economic cooperation should strengthen, rather than weaken, Fiji's long-term ability to make independent policy decisions.

Conclusion

I support a strong and respectful Fiji-Australia relationship. However, friendship between nations should not mean that Parliament gives up its responsibility to scrutinise legally binding commitments. The Government should therefore provide clear answers concerning mutual defence, visiting forces, foreign military presence, critical infrastructure, intelligence sharing, third-party security arrangements, sovereignty and parliamentary oversight before these treaties are ratified.

I respectfully recommend that Parliament not approve the treaties without appropriate safeguards, interpretive clarifications and mechanisms for democratic oversight.

Fiji can be a trusted friend and partner of Australia while remaining fully sovereign and independent in its foreign-policy decisions.

Vinaka vakalevu.

Semesa Tuicolo

[Email address]

[Contact number, if you wish to include it]

- **Mr Romitesh Kant,**
- **Ms Mereoni Chung,**
- **Mr Epeli Lesuma, and**
- **Mr Jason Titifanue**

SUBMISSION ON THE VUVALE UNION AND VEITACINI TREATY

FIJI PARLIAMENT'S STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

Submission by: Romitesh Kant, Mereoni Chung, Epeli Lesuma, Jason Titifanue

This submission is made in our personal capacities. The views expressed are our own and do not represent any employer or organisation with which we are affiliated.

This submission is made jointly.

Dr Romitesh Kant is a Fijian researcher and civil-society practitioner whose work focuses on Pacific politics, democratic governance, political masculinities, gender and regional security. He has written on the Pacific Ocean of Peace and on the growing use of regional compacts to organise security cooperation in the Pacific.

Mereoni Chung is a Fijian consultant working with Pacific CSOs and development partners, supporting programs on gender, development, policy and Pacific Island issues, with specific research experience in political ecology and human rights analysis and advocacy.

Epeli Lesuma is an Indigenous Fijian and concerned citizen with an interest in foreign affairs, national sovereignty, regional security and Pacific regionalism. His professional experience spans Fiji's public sector, regional development, and civil society, including engagement in regional policy processes on Pacific peace and security.

Dr Jason Titifanue is a Rotuman researcher and civil-society ally. His work focuses on climate-related (im)mobility and justice, as well as Pacific regional politics in the context of climate change and narratives of green transition, mineral demands, security, and deep-sea mining

We welcome the Committee's decision to invite public submissions. Section 51 of the Constitution gives Parliament a substantive constitutional responsibility: an international treaty binds the State only after parliamentary approval.[1] That responsibility is especially important here because these instruments are indefinite, create executive-led implementation machinery and may shape Fiji's strategic choices for decades.

Our position is not based on hostility to Australia or to security cooperation. Fiji and Australia have close historical, economic, social and security ties, and both treaties contain worthwhile commitments. Fiji also exercised agency in negotiating them.[2] The central question is narrower and more important: whether Parliament and the public have enough information, legal clarity and safeguards to give informed consent to the obligations now before them.

[1] Constitution of the Republic of Fiji 2013, s 51 (Parliamentary authority over international treaties and conventions).

[2] Fiji Parliamentary Debates, Daily Hansard, 25 May 2026.

The treaties promise practical benefits. They recognise climate change and wider forms of insecurity, affirm democracy and sovereignty, and provide a framework for cooperation in mobility, infrastructure, policing, defence, border protection, cyber security and disaster response. Those objectives deserve support.

At the same time, the legal texts leave material questions unanswered. The Vuvale Union progressively integrates security cooperation and requires consultation about third-party involvement in sensitive sectors. The parties describe the Veitacini Treaty as a military alliance, note its mutual-defence commitment following an armed attack in the Pacific, and note its anticipation of bilateral and multilateral visiting-forces arrangements.[3] Neither treaty defines several terms that determine the practical reach of those commitments.

The public record also does not include the ten-year Vuvale Work Plan, although Parliament's written analysis describes it as a living document that will guide implementation.[4] Parliament has also not been given a consolidated national-interest analysis setting out legal, fiscal, human-rights, environmental and regional consequences. Public statements about aid, infrastructure and capability development are useful context, but promised benefits cannot substitute for informed consent to security obligations.

The Committee should therefore recommend deferral, not automatic rejection. Deferral would allow the Government to provide the missing evidence, clarify disputed terms, obtain binding side letters or interpretative assurances where appropriate, and submit any implementing legislation or subsidiary arrangements for scrutiny. Parliament could then reconsider approval on a properly informed basis.

> **Central recommendation**
>
> **Parliament should defer approval of both treaties in their present form.**
>
> The Committee should first require the Government to publish the implementation material and secure binding assurances on sovereignty, defence commitments, parliamentary control, visiting forces, regional governance, human rights and public accountability.

[3] Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty), official treaty text.

[4] Fiji Parliament, Written Analysis of the Treaties, para 9.4.

A fair assessment should acknowledge what is constructive in the agreements. The Vuvale Union places climate change, economic resilience, mobility, gender equality and people-to-people relationships alongside conventional security. It commits the parties to listen, consult and deepen cooperation in ways responsive to national priorities. The Veitacini Treaty affirms democratic values and provides a basis for coordination when either country faces serious external threats.

Fiji can benefit from improved maritime awareness, disaster response, policing capability, cyber resilience, border management and infrastructure. Greater predictability in the relationship may also reduce the risk of misunderstanding. These are legitimate national interests. The issue is how to preserve them while preventing open-ended commitments, executive drift and unequal capability from narrowing Fiji's independent choices.

This balance matters because dependency does not require bad intentions to take hold. It can emerge gradually through financing arrangements, technical systems, embedded personnel, and procurement pathways that become harder to unwind the longer they run.[5] Strong safeguards protect both parties by making cooperation more legitimate, transparent, and durable.

4. PARLIAMENT CANNOT ASSESS WHAT IT HAS NOT SEEN

Parliament's approval under section 51 should be meaningful rather than ceremonial. Yet the Committee is being asked to assess framework treaties without the full implementation architecture. The official written analysis states that a ten-year Work Plan will guide the Vuvale partnership and be reviewed annually. It also characterises that plan as a living document. If the Work Plan allocates priorities, creates programs, identifies infrastructure or governs operational cooperation, it is central to understanding the treaty's effects.

Before approval, Parliament should receive and publish the current Work Plan, subject only to narrowly justified redactions. It should also receive a consolidated national-interest analysis covering constitutional and statutory compatibility, fiscal exposure, borrowing and contingent liabilities, procurement, data governance, environmental and social impacts, human rights, labour mobility, land and customary interests, and interaction with Fiji's existing international obligations.

5 Pacific Network on Globalisation, 'Fortress or Partner? Analysing Regional Insecurities and Pacific Militarisation through Regional Compacts'.

The Committee should distinguish treaty approval from approval of later instruments. Article 11 of the

Vuvale Union anticipates subsidiary agreements and implementing arrangements.[6] Article 7 of the Veitacini Treaty anticipates further visiting-forces arrangements.[7] Parliament should know which instruments will be legally binding, which require legislation, which the executive can conclude alone, and which will be tabled for prior scrutiny.

This is not a hypothetical concern. In September 2026, senior Fiji and Australian land force commanders met in Suva for the second RFMF-Australian Army Strategic Land Staff Talks, explicitly linked in official reporting to the Veitacini Treaty, and agreed engagement priorities for 2027 covering land force development, training, exercises and military rotations.[8] Operational planning of this kind is already proceeding through existing military channels while the Work Plan remains unpublished and the treaties remain before Parliament.

RECOMMENDATION 1: DEFER APPROVAL. RECOMMEND THAT PARLIAMENT WITHHOLD APPROVAL UNTIL THE GOVERNMENT PROVIDES THE FULL IMPLEMENTATION RECORD AND ADDRESSES THE SAFEGUARDS SET OUT BELOW.

RECOMMENDATION 2: PUBLISH THE EVIDENCE. REQUIRE PUBLICATION OF THE CURRENT TEN-YEAR WORK PLAN AND A CONSOLIDATED NATIONAL-INTEREST, LEGAL, FINANCIAL, HUMAN-RIGHTS, ENVIRONMENTAL AND REGIONAL-IMPACT ANALYSIS, WITH ONLY SPECIFIC AND JUSTIFIED REDACTIONS.

5. CONSISTENCY WITH FIJI'S FOREIGN POLICY AND NATIONAL SECURITY FRAMEWORKS

These treaties should be measured against more than their own text. They should also be read against Fiji's own foreign-policy and national-security framework, adopted specifically to guide decisions of this kind.

The Foreign Policy White Paper 2024 states that Fiji is a non-aligned state and has no security alliance with any nation.[9] It also commits Fiji to preserving its options rather than being tied exclusively to one power, and to developing the Ocean of Peace through the Pacific Islands Forum and the Melanesian Spearhead Group.[10] The Veitacini Treaty is expressly named an alliance, describes the parties as Pacific military nations, and commits each party under Article 6 to act to meet the common danger following an armed attack. Government policy can evolve, but a shift of this kind deserves a direct answer. The Government should say whether Fiji still regards itself as non-aligned, whether Veitacini amounts to a

6 Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union, official treaty text, Art 11.

7 Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty), official treaty text, Art 7.

8 Fiji One News, 'Fiji and Australia deepen land forces cooperation', 8 September 2026.

9 Fiji Foreign Policy White Paper 2024, p. 17.

10 Fiji Foreign Policy White Paper 2024, pp. 9-10.

security alliance in the White Paper's own terms, how the mutual-defence commitment preserves Fiji's freedom to determine its own response, and whether this represents a formal revision of the White Paper.

Read together with Veitacini Article 12 (accession requires the consent of existing parties), Article 13 (Australia as Depositary), and Vuvale Articles 4 and 5.2 (third-party engagement and the bilateral Ocean of Peace Centre), the White Paper's commitment to Forum-led regionalism raises a further question: whether these arrangements strengthen Pacific Islands Forum regionalism or give Fiji and Australia disproportionate authority to define the Ocean of Peace themselves.

The National Security and Defence Review 2024 supports deeper cooperation of the kind these treaties contain, including capability partnerships, intelligence sharing and standing operational commitments with Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Tonga.[11] That support cuts both ways: the same Review treats civilian control and parliamentary oversight as essential, and consultation, transparency and civil-society participation as foundational to national security rather than optional extras.[12] It warns specifically that intensive external engagement can stretch Fiji's capacity to exercise sovereign decision-making, allow external actors to bypass civil-service and democratic checks, create pressure to take sides, and produce donor-driven security capabilities shaped by the donor's interests rather than Fiji's own requirements.[13] These are not abstract risks. They describe the dynamic this submission raises about the Vuvale Union's third-party consultation clause, its financing arrangements and its embedded-personnel provisions.

The National Security Strategy 2025-2029 turns these principles into government policy. It commits Fiji to retaining the freedom to make independent decisions, sovereign authority over its territory and data, rigorous parliamentary scrutiny, and transparency to the Fijian community.[14] Pillar Six requires the Government to establish an International Security Engagement Strategy specifically to protect sovereignty, and designates this a high-priority action to be completed within twelve to eighteen months.[15] We could not locate a published International Security Engagement Strategy. That raises a direct procedural question: has the Strategy been completed; were the Vuvale Union and Veitacini Treaty negotiated within it; did the National Security Council formally assess their implications for sovereignty and non-alignment; and if the Strategy remains incomplete, why Parliament should approve treaties of this scale before the Government's own framework for assessing them exists. The National Security

11 Fiji National Security and Defence Review 2024, pp. 46-48, 68-70.

12 Fiji National Security and Defence Review 2024, pp. 9-11, 14-17.

13 Fiji National Security and Defence Review 2024, pp. 38-39, 57-58.

14 Fiji National Security Strategy 2025-2029, pp. 15-18.

15 Fiji National Security Strategy 2025-2029, pp. 45, 61 (Pillar Six, Action 6.1).

Strategy also provides for national-security reporting to this Committee and to the Leader of the Opposition,[16] which supports treating ratification as the start of Parliament's oversight role rather than its end.

RECOMMENDATION 3: REQUIRE A POLICY-ALIGNMENT ASSESSMENT. BEFORE APPROVAL, REQUIRE THE GOVERNMENT TO TABLE A CONSOLIDATED ASSESSMENT SHOWING HOW THE VUVALE UNION AND VEITACINI TREATY COMPLY WITH THE FOREIGN POLICY WHITE PAPER 2024, THE NATIONAL SECURITY AND DEFENCE REVIEW 2024, THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY 2025-2029, AND THE PENDING INTERNATIONAL SECURITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY, ADDRESSING NONALIGNMENT, PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM PRIMACY, CIVILIAN AND PARLIAMENTARY OVERSIGHT, AND GEOPOLITICAL RISK.

6. SOVEREIGNTY AND THIRD-PARTY RELATIONSHIPS

Article 4 of the Vuvale Union deserves close scrutiny.[17] It requires the parties to engage one another when considering third-party involvement in critical infrastructure, technology and security sectors. It also identifies third-party military or security bases, ongoing presence, arrangements or visits as matters that could threaten or undermine either party's security. The parties further undertake not to undermine each other's ability to meet treaty obligations and must consult at either party's request.

These provisions do not expressly give Australia a veto over Fiji's decisions. However, their combined operation may create a strong expectation of prior consultation and strategic alignment. Parliament's own written analysis describes critical infrastructure and security as domains for 'traditional partners'.[18] This language is not in the treaty, but it indicates how officials may understand implementation. Given the imbalance in economic and military capacity, informal pressure can matter as much as a formal veto.[19] That imbalance is not confined to Fiji and Australia: Australia's own military infrastructure is already substantially bound up with the United States, and the extent of that access is now an open question inside Australia's governing party. Fiji's assurances should address more than its bilateral relationship with Australia.

Parliament should require a binding clarification that consultation does not create exclusivity, a right of consent or a preferred-supplier rule. Fiji must retain final authority over diplomatic relations, infrastructure partners, procurement and security cooperation. Decisions should continue to follow

16 Fiji National Security Strategy 2025-2029, p. 55.

17 Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union, official treaty text, Art 4.

18 Fiji Parliament, Written Analysis of the Treaties, para 4.4.

19 Guardian Australia, 'US military bases in Australia, mapped', 7 September 2026.

transparent law, objective national-interest tests and competitive processes. A disagreement with Australia should not by itself amount to undermining the treaty.

RECOMMENDATION 4: PROTECT INDEPENDENT DECISION-MAKING.

OBTAIN A BINDING ASSURANCE THAT ARTICLES 4.2 TO 4.8 CREATE NO AUSTRALIAN VETO, EXCLUSIVITY RULE OR PRESUMPTION IN FAVOUR OF A 'TRADITIONAL PARTNER', AND DO NOT DISPLACE FIJI'S PROCUREMENT, INVESTMENT-SCREENING OR CONSTITUTIONAL PROCESSES.

7. THE MUTUAL-DEFENCE OBLIGATION MUST BE DEFINED

Article 6 of the Veitacini Treaty provides that an armed attack on either party within the Pacific would lead each party to act to meet the common danger, in accordance with its domestic processes.[20] This is a serious commitment. The text does not define 'armed attack', 'within the Pacific', 'common danger' or the action required. It is therefore unclear how the clause applies to cyber operations, attacks on ships or aircraft, attacks on personnel or assets outside national territory, hybrid coercion, or incidents connected to another alliance or deployment.

Government assurances that the treaty does not automatically require a military response are politically important but should be translated into legal and procedural clarity. Parliament should ask for a joint interpretative statement specifying the geographic and material scope of Article 6, confirming that each party decides its response independently, and confirming that non-military measures may satisfy the obligation.

Fiji should also define its 'domestic processes'. Except for immediate self-defence or an urgent emergency, deployment of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces into hostilities pursuant to Article 6 should require prior parliamentary authorisation. Where immediate action is unavoidable, the executive should promptly report to Parliament and seek time-limited approval to continue. Parliament should also be informed how Article 6 interacts with Australia's obligations under ANZUS, AUKUS-related activities and any future alliance commitments, while preserving Fiji's stated policy of being friends to all and enemies to none.

This is not a hypothetical question. Research published in September 2026 found that the United States now has some form of access to more than half of Australia's military bases,[21] and a Labour-aligned grassroots group, Labour Against War, publicly called on the Albanese government to chart a course away from what it termed the 'American war machine'.[22] The Foreign Minister told the Senate that the facilities remain Australian bases under Australian command. Fiji cannot assume Australia's alliance settings are settled or fully within Australia's independent control, and should seek that clarity directly.

[20] Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty), official treaty text, Art 6.

[21] Guardian Australia, 'US military bases in Australia, mapped', 7 September 2026, reporting Nautilus Institute research.

RECOMMENDATION 5: CLARIFY ARTICLE 6. REQUIRE A JOINT, PUBLIC AND BINDING INTERPRETATION OF THE TRIGGER,

GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE AND PERMISSIBLE RESPONSES UNDER THE MUTUAL-DEFENCE CLAUSE, INCLUDING CYBER, HYBRID, MARITIME AND EXTRATERRITORIAL SCENARIOS.

RECOMMENDATION 6: RETAIN PARLIAMENTARY CONTROL OVER DEPLOYMENT. REQUIRE PRIOR PARLIAMENTARY AUTHORISATION FOR ANY DEPLOYMENT INTO HOSTILITIES UNDER ARTICLE 6, SUBJECT TO A NARROW EMERGENCY EXCEPTION FOLLOWED BY PROMPT REPORTING AND TIME-LIMITED PARLIAMENTARY APPROVAL.

8. VISITING FORCES, BASES AND THE RISK OF MILITARISATION

Article 7 of the Veitacini Treaty commits the parties to develop and maintain bilateral and multilateral visiting-forces arrangements as necessary.[23] This sits alongside the existing Fiji-Australia Status of Forces Agreement. Parliament's written analysis also refers to embedded officers, forward operating bases on remote islands, stronger air and maritime capability, and a shift from a defensive to an offensive posture.[24] These statements go beyond routine training and require direct public explanation.

Any new or expanded visiting-forces arrangement can affect criminal and civil jurisdiction, immunity, customs, weapons, environmental liability, land access, local communities, data, procurement and the rights of service personnel. Forward facilities may alter the strategic character of locations and expose communities to environmental or security risks. These choices should not be made through an unpublished work plan or administrative arrangement.

The Committee should seek confirmation that neither treaty itself authorises a foreign base, permanent presence or particular deployment. Each new bilateral or multilateral visiting-forces instrument, basing arrangement or material expansion of access should be tabled in Parliament before it takes effect. It should include transparent rules on jurisdiction, claims, environmental remediation, local consultation, landowner consent where applicable, weapons, hazardous materials, sexual exploitation and abuse, and termination.

RECOMMENDATION 7: REQUIRE SEPARATE SCRUTINY OF OPERATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS. MAKE PARLIAMENTARY APPROVAL A CONDITION FOR ANY NEW VISITING FORCES, BASING, ACCESS OR MAJOR OPERATIONAL ARRANGEMENT, AND REQUIRE PRIOR ENVIRONMENTAL, SOCIAL, HUMAN-RIGHTS AND LAND-IMPACT ASSESSMENT.

22 Guardian Australia, 'Grassroots Labor pressure group urges Albanese government away from the "American war machine"', 8 September 2026.

23 Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty), official treaty text, Art 7.

24 Fiji Parliament, Written Analysis of the Treaties, paras 7.1-7.3.

9. EXECUTIVE MACHINERY NEEDS DEMOCRATIC OVERSIGHT

The Vuvale Forum and the Vuvale Bukmak are empowered to consider and decide any matter concerning the relationship and to create additional forums. The Work Plan may evolve annually. This flexibility is useful for diplomacy, but it can also allow substantive policy to develop without renewed public consent.

Article 9 even permits amendments to take effect from a retrospective date if the parties agree.[25]

The treaties are indefinite. The Veitacini Treaty provides for review only after ten years and only if requested.[26] Ten years is too long for a new alliance operating during rapid technological and geopolitical change. Parliamentary oversight should begin immediately and recur at least every five years. Annual public reports should describe decisions, expenditure, deployments, exercises, facilities, data-sharing activities, subsidiary instruments and progress against the Work Plan.

The inter-state dispute clauses exclude courts and third parties from resolving disputes between the governments. Parliament should obtain legal confirmation that these clauses do not oust the jurisdiction of Fiji's courts over constitutional rights, administrative legality, criminal matters or claims brought by individuals. Nothing in the treaties should reduce access to remedy.

RECOMMENDATION 8: CREATE AN OVERSIGHT FRAMEWORK. REQUIRE ANNUAL REPORTING TO PARLIAMENT, PUBLICATION AND TABLING OF WORK PLAN UPDATES AND SUBSIDIARY INSTRUMENTS, AN INDEPENDENT REVIEW WITHIN THREE YEARS, AND MANDATORY PARLIAMENTARY REVIEW AT LEAST EVERY FIVE YEARS.

RECOMMENDATION 9: PREVENT EXECUTIVE AMENDMENT BY DRIFT. REQUIRE PRIOR PARLIAMENTARY APPROVAL FOR SUBSTANTIVE TREATY AMENDMENTS, RETROSPECTIVE AMENDMENTS, AND IMPLEMENTING INSTRUMENTS THAT CREATE NEW LEGAL, FINANCIAL, SECURITY OR RIGHTS-AFFECTING OBLIGATIONS.

10. THE OCEAN OF PEACE MUST REMAIN PACIFIC-LED

The treaties are presented as an operational expression of the Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration. Fiji deserves recognition for helping move that idea from aspiration toward implementation. At the same time, bilateral action can shape the meaning of a regional norm before regional institutions and Pacific communities have settled its practical content.[27]

The Vuvale Union establishes an Ocean of Peace Centre in Suva by agreement between Fiji and Australia, in consultation with Pacific Islands Forum members.[28] Consultation is not the same as collective Forum

25 Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union, official treaty text, Art 9.

26 Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty), official treaty text, Art 15.

27 Romitesh Kant, Vehia Wheeler and Mereoni Chung, 'The Pacific Ocean of Peace: a promise or a paradox?', Australian Journal of International Affairs 79(3), 2025.

28 Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union, official treaty text.

creation, mandate or governance. The Veitacini Treaty also permits accession only by invitation and unanimous agreement, while Australia serves as depositary.[29] The depositary role is administrative, but the accession design confirms that this is a selective treaty framework rather than a Forum-wide institution.

The public record does not show that Forum leaders collectively selected a military alliance or a FijiAustralia centre as the preferred mechanism for implementing the Declaration. Parliament should therefore ensure that the Centre does not claim to speak for the region without a Forum mandate. Its governance should include Pacific governments and meaningful participation by civil society, women, youth, persons with disabilities, faith communities and other groups directly affected by security policy.

Fiji should also make clear that implementation of these treaties will not pre-empt wider regional deliberation. The Declaration's language of peace, sovereignty, human dignity, solidarity and Pacific-led regionalism should guide the alliance, rather than the alliance becoming the default definition of the Declaration.

RECOMMENDATION 10: PROTECT REGIONAL OWNERSHIP. SEEK A PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM MANDATE AND INCLUSIVE REGIONAL GOVERNANCE FOR ANY CENTRE CLAIMING AN OCEAN OF PEACE ROLE, AND CONFIRM THAT BILATERAL TREATY MACHINERY WILL NOT DETERMINE THE REGIONAL DECLARATION'S MEANING OR IMPLEMENTATION.

11. PEACE REQUIRES LIMITS ON MILITARISATION

The treaties create detailed machinery for defence cooperation, interoperability, visiting forces, infrastructure and mutual response. They contain far less detail on restraint. They include no comparable mechanisms for de-escalation, demilitarisation, nuclear justice, arms control, prevention of military harm, or community peacebuilding. Climate change is recognised, but that recognition does not, by itself, limit the environmental or strategic effects of military activity.

Fiji's support for a nuclear-free Pacific and its obligations under the Treaty of Rarotonga must remain central. The Committee should avoid overstating what that treaty prohibits: it does not itself impose a complete ban on nuclear-powered vessels or every form of transit. This is precisely why the Government should state its policy clearly. Parliament should seek assurances concerning the stationing, storage, transit and deployment of nuclear weapons; visits by nuclear-powered vessels; hazardous materials; environmental liability; autonomous weapons; and any activity associated with nuclear deterrence.

[29] Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty), official treaty text, Arts 12-13.

The Committee should also ask whether forward operating bases, offensive capabilities or interoperability with external forces could increase Fiji's strategic exposure. A security policy committed to peace should identify not only what capabilities Fiji will acquire, but what forms of military activity it will decline.

RECOMMENDATION 11: ADD PEACE AND RESTRAINT SAFEGUARDS. REQUIRE PUBLIC POLICY COMMITMENTS ON DEMILITARISATION, NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND PROPULSION, AUTONOMOUS WEAPONS, ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION, FOREIGN ACCESS AND DE-ESCALATION, CONSISTENT WITH FIJI'S REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL OBLIGATIONS.

12. GENDER EQUALITY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND COMMUNITY SAFETY

The Vuvale Union recognises gender equality as a requirement for sustainable development and prosperity, consistent with the National Security and Defence Review's own requirement that gender equity, Women, Peace and Security and human rights be mainstreamed into national-security decisionmaking.[30] That is welcome, but the security provisions do not operationalise gender. The treaties contain no clear Women, Peace and Security mechanism, participation standard, gender-impact process or remedy framework. Security institutions can reproduce unequal power even when gender equality appears in a preamble or general cooperation clause.[31]

Implementation should include gender and human-rights impact assessment, sex- and age-disaggregated reporting, and meaningful participation by women in all their diversity, youth, persons with disabilities, LGBTQI+ communities and local civil society. Visiting forces and joint operations should be governed by enforceable codes and independent complaint processes addressing sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. Affected people must have accessible remedies.

These protections should connect with Fiji's National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against All Women and Girls 2023-2028[32] and Australia's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 20212031.[33] They should also address how labour mobility, deployment and security-sector expansion affect care responsibilities, family separation and economic security.

RECOMMENDATION 12: MAKE EQUALITY OPERATIONAL. REQUIRE A FUNDED GENDER, DISABILITY AND HUMAN-RIGHTS IMPLEMENTATION PLAN, REPRESENTATIVE PARTICIPATION, DISAGGREGATED REPORTING, PREVENTION STANDARDS, INDEPENDENT COMPLAINTS AND EFFECTIVE REMEDIES.

13. ECONOMIC, LABOUR AND DIGITAL SAFEGUARDS

30 Fiji National Security and Defence Review 2024, pp. 62-64.

31 Romitesh Kant, 'Calm seas, strong currents: masculinities beneath the Pacific's Ocean of Peace'.

32 Fiji National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against All Women and Girls 2023-2028.

33 Australian National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2021-2031, 2025 Progress Report.

Australian statements link the treaties to more than A$1 billion in grants and loans over the coming decade,[34] alongside policing, ports, climate infrastructure and digital-screening investments. These commitments may benefit Fiji, but Parliament needs to know the terms. The Government should disclose grant and loan proportions, debt and contingent liabilities, ownership, procurement conditions, localcontent requirements, maintenance costs and the treatment of land and community interests.

Assess economic integration and labour mobility from the perspective of Fijian workers and families. Parliament should ask how the agreements will protect wages, recruitment standards, portability of benefits, freedom from exploitation, family unity and reintegration. The distribution of benefits and burdens should be transparent, including impacts on rural, maritime and informal communities.

Digital cooperation and critical infrastructure raise questions about data sovereignty, privacy, cyber access, artificial intelligence and foreign control of essential systems. Parliament should require clear rules on data location, access, onward transfer, retention, independent oversight and remedies for misuse. Security classification should not become a blanket reason to conceal commercial or rights-affecting decisions.

RECOMMENDATION 13: SEPARATE BENEFITS FROM SECURITY CONSENT. REQUIRE TRANSPARENT FINANCIAL, PROCUREMENT, LABOUR, LAND AND DATA SAFEGUARDS. ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE SHOULD NOT BE TREATED AS CONSIDERATION FOR ACCEPTING UNDEFINED DEFENCE OR STRATEGIC OBLIGATIONS.

[34] Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, tabling speech on the Ocean of Peace Alliance and Australia-Fiji Vuvale Union, describing more than A$1 billion in investment, including grants and loans, over the decade.

14. QUESTIONS THE COMMITTEE SHOULD PUT TO GOVERNMENT

1. Why has the current ten-year Work Plan not been published, and which of its provisions are legally, financially or operationally consequential?
2. What conduct constitutes an 'armed attack' and where are the boundaries of 'the Pacific' for Article 6 of the Veitacini Treaty?
3. What actions could Fiji be required to take to 'meet the common danger', and who authorises a deployment into hostilities?
4. Could an Australian commitment arising from ANZUS, AUKUS-related activity or another future arrangement trigger consultation or action by Fiji?

5. Do Articles 4.2 to 4.8 of the Vuvale Union create any expectation of exclusivity, prior consent or preference concerning third countries, procurement or critical infrastructure?
6. What forward operating bases, embedded positions, sovereign air capabilities or offensive capabilities are presently contemplated?
7. Which visiting-forces or multilateral access arrangements are planned, and will each return to Parliament before taking effect?
8. How will Fiji's courts retain jurisdiction over constitutional, criminal, administrative and civil claims involving treaty implementation?
9. What limits will apply to nuclear weapons, nuclear-powered vessels, autonomous weapons, hazardous materials and activities connected to nuclear deterrence?
10. What formal role will the Pacific Islands Forum and Pacific civil society have in governing the proposed Ocean of Peace Centre?
11. What are the grant, loan, procurement, ownership, maintenance and data-governance terms attached to the announced package of cooperation?
12. What independent complaints, monitoring and remedy mechanisms will protect communities, workers and people affected by visiting forces or joint operations?
13. Has the International Security Engagement Strategy required under the National Security Strategy 2025-2029 been completed, were these treaties negotiated within it, and did the National Security Council formally assess their implications for sovereignty and non-alignment?

15. CONCLUSION

Approval is not a binary choice between partnership and isolation. Fiji can maintain a close and constructive relationship with Australia while insisting on precision, reciprocity, public accountability and regional legitimacy. Those safeguards are not obstacles to cooperation. They are what make cooperation worthy of public trust.

The treaties should not be rejected simply because they involve Australia; they should be scrutinised because they bind Fiji. Parliament should defer approval until the Government publishes the missing implementation material, clarifies the scope of the obligations and secures binding safeguards. Approval can then be reconsidered on evidence, not expectation.

A Pacific Ocean of Peace should be measured not only by the strength of alliances, but by the autonomy of Pacific peoples, the restraint of powerful partners, the safety of communities and the ability of democratic institutions to decide the conditions of cooperation.

Mr. Moimoi Baleilevuka

Renegotiate Terms of the Veitacini Treaty

Recommendations

1. It is recommended that Fiji reopen the veitacini Treaty to renegotiate language that will strongly support Fiji's foreign policy goals of non-alignment. Such that, (all) parties to the treaty must remain non-aligned.
2. It is recommended that, with Fiji championing the Ocean of Peace declaration, should demonstrate the ability to maintain peace today and future peace by remaining firm on its non-aligned posture.
3. It is recommended that the Government of Fiji complete fact finding missions to analyze implications of the treaty, engaging intentionally with Traditional village and community leaders, non-governmental organizations, Civil Society groups, Faith-based organizations and Youth.
4. It is recommended that the Government of Fiji conduct futures exercises with all relevant actors to the Treaty.
5. It is recommended that the government of Fiji conduct a review of its Foreign Policy White Paper, to re-analyze its bilateral relations and investigate prioritization of diversification of partners.

1. Policy Problem

- Ratifying the Veitacini treaty (the Treaty) will significantly increase the likelihood of deteriorating Fiji's global non-alignment posture.
- The nexus of Fiji's national security concerns and economic priorities is one recognized and integrated within Fiji's domestic institutions and carefully embedded within our diplomatic relations. However, between balancing diplomatic relations and navigating through competing geostrategic interests, Fiji's security and developmental priorities are being marginalized and this is especially visible in The Treaty.
- Language within the Treaty binds Fiji indefinitely to Australia. We cannot deny that Fiji and Australia maintain a large diplomacy capability gap due to their resource differences, as such, expectations and benefits from the treaty will always remain unequal for Fiji.
- Australia has, over decades, demonstrated its strong alliance to United States of America. As of recently the US has arguably demonstrated a destructive-like diplomatic nature. Given this context, the Veitacini treaty fails to establish safeguarding language to protect parties from indirect-ally's unpredictable behavior. Without careful reconsideration the people of Fiji are at risk of future entrapment.
- Anxiety plagues the people of Fiji for what unforeseen expectations are forced upon Fiji, should the government ratify the treaty without critically reviewing what it demands of us.

2. Current Fiji Approach

- Under *Fiji's Foreign Policy White Paper* (FFWP) it states that while Fiji remains nonaligned, non-alignment should not be mistaken for equal distance (Government of Fiji , 2024). Fiji has traditional partners who share values and historical ties, in which Fiji will naturally lean towards.
- Through Fiji's commitment as a Member to the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat (PIFS), Fiji largely benefits from PIFS facilitation capabilities. Leaders of the Pacific are led by values enshrined in the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* (Pacific Island Forum Secretariat, 2022). As such, our Pacific Island partners have over decades leveraged their collective capabilities.
- Fiji's access to these collective resources has been beneficial across varying sectors. Take for instance the initiatives facilitated by the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), who on the security front, has enabled maritime surveillance resourcing from the US to strengthen Fiji's border security (US Department of State , 2022). On the economic front, the agency provides support in monitoring Fish stocks and supporting the ministry with regional and national scientific material to inform policies.
- Likewise, the Pacific Fusion Center engages with Fiji's national security specialists, through its secondment programs, that aim to build national intelligence capacity, to improve national intelligence gathering. Additionally, the agency produces periodic regional security assessments that offer insights on our regional security climate.
- Australia is Fiji's largest development partner. Through the *Development Partnership Plan*- Australia supports Fiji through, health, education, critical infrastructure, tourism, disaster relief, and private sector engagement.
- Australia funds Fiji's Peacekeeping, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster relief Camp – Blackrock. Fiji and Australia's defense relationship is longstanding. There is clear indication that collaborative programs between Australia and Fiji, have formed the basis of what the Treaty will be officially formalizing.

3. Critical Analysis / Policy Gap

Strategic Enmeshment

- The convergence of economic and national security priorities has set up an environment fit for strategic enmeshment (Powles, 2025). In which Australia has expanded cooperation across security, development, climate change and economic sectors.
- Australia has frequently operated outside of formalized frameworks (Pacific Network on Globalisation , 2026). This is evident in the formation of both the Joint Heads of Pacific Security, which has only recently been integrated into the Pacific Island Forum architecture, and the South Pacific Defense Ministers Meeting. Both forums are avenues that pre-establish regional security priorities outside of the existing Forum regional security architecture.

• This strategic behavior from Australia extends to bilateral relationships. Before any treaty had been signed, Fiji and Australia's defense partnership had been longstanding through initiatives such as the Blackrock camp, and frequent peer-to-peer learning through military related programs (Khalil, 2026)

- The ongoing Vuvale partnership, since its establishment in 2019, has preemptively established norms between the partners, for Fiji more than Australia. This has further complicated efforts to identify which security priorities are true for Fiji and those that are not. Herein lies the tensions between national security and sovereignty protection.

Developmental Disparities

- While Fiji's foreign policy decision to lean towards traditional partners have built successful relationships within the region, the Pacific is diverse with developmental disparities.
- Fiji, in comparison to Australia, lacks the legislative machinery to ensure that a legally binding document will indefinitely serve the best interests for both parties. This is especially evident in that the Treaty fails to make mention of binding obligations to address Fiji's Drug and HIV epidemic – Which are security issues that are Fiji's greatest threat to date.

Non-alignment uncertainties

- Under the International Humanitarian Law, third party states have an obligation to refrain from executing actions that would indicate, whether direct or indirect, support to either parties of the conflict (International Committee of the Red Cross , 2025).
- It is suggested that international law may develop legislature in the future, that would extend responsibilities of conflict to third party states who host belligerents bases (Strauss, 2021), which would lose non-alignment privileges.
- The Veitacini Treaty fails to account for the risks Fiji imposes upon itself. Specifically looking at Article 6 (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade , 2026), declaring Mutual Defense. Fiji is not prepared for the level of allyship that Australia demonstrates to its own partners, most notably America.
- Australia responded to America after the September 11 bombing, by invoking the ANZUS treaty and sending its troops to Iraq, shortly after the unfortunate Bali Bombing in 2002, killing up to 88 Australians, had occurred.
- The signing of the Veitacini treaty, upholds an indefinite timeline and retains a complex sunset clause. Future implications of this treaty questions neutrality, autonomy, legal and moral capabilities. Fiji must, with all of its effort, seek to avoid all possibilities of entrapment.

5. Conclusion

- To reiterate – The ratification of the Veitacini treaty without careful review, will significantly increase the likelihood of deteriorating Fiji's non-alignment posture.
- It is highly recommended that the Government of Fiji allow greater consideration of the long term consequences, before committing to the existing terms.

- Finally, lasting peace is achieved when addressing developmental gaps and strengthening the Island states ability to determine its future.

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Mr. Jope Tarai

Submission on the Fiji – Australia Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance

Name: Jope Tarai

Nationality: Fijian

Overall positioning: Humbly requesting the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence to;

1. **Insist that the Fijian parliament to reject the Ocean of Peace Alliance**
2. **Insist a re-negotiation of the Fiji-Australia Union 3.**

Propose an authentic Oceania of Peace Treaty for the

parliament of Fiji and the Prime Minister's Office.

The submission is primarily informed by two key vantage points. The first is in being a "long suffering student" of regionalism and Pacific regionalism, it has led me to pour over records upon records of the Pacific Way, regional arrangements and more particularly, a longstanding Treaty in the Pacific. Having examined the Treaty between the US and Pacific governments, its detailed records, listening to key officials, culminating in a dissertation some years ago, have provided depth and layers of concern, which I fear is not considered in these discussions. The second vantage point, is having spent close to four years in the ACT, I and a handful of Pacific graduate students, have attended formal and informal meetings, listening and observing how Australian securitisation of our region is conceived, designed and projected back to us. For a lack of a better expression, afew of us have seen how "*the security sausage is made*". In being in the ACT, I was fortunate to have sat in Australia's Old Parliament House and hear the Prime Minister proclaim in Canberra and to the world, his idea of the Ocean of Peace. That evening and the prevailing discussions and debates continue to live in my mind, as an ongoing suffering student of Pacific regionalism and here today as a tax/debt payer of and for these magnanimous proclamations.

These vantage points have informed this submission but also in being a critical Pacific scholar, I have been compelled to challenge and question the overall position of this submission. As such, since the announcements of these two Treaties, I have read, re-read, reflected on these two documents, pledges, promises, speeches and claims to try to balance or mediate this overall position. Dissatisfied, I consistently watch Australian Defence debates, discussions and positioning to try to balance the position I offer today. However, despite these efforts, it is increasingly difficult to see these treaties differently. The more I read and reflect, the more I fear that, the Fijians, the taxpayers of this country and their nation's sovereignty will be at risk, if both these treaties are uncritically accepted.

I want to begin by highlighting these two arrangements as **Treaties**, because both are treaties even though one is titled the Union and the other the Alliance. I will refer to them here as the so-called Ocean of Peace Alliance and the Fiji-Australia Union, while returning later to the

question of why I consider the use of indigenous terminology for these two treaties problematic.

In substantive terms, these treaties contain legally binding obligations. This is significant not only for the Government of Fiji but also for the people of Fiji more broadly. It is therefore important that we examine carefully what these arrangements require of Fiji and what obligations they may create.

My principal concerns relate particularly to the Ocean of Peace Alliance and several of its provisions. **I detail below several sections which clarify why the Alliance needs to be rejected.**

1. The Security Purpose of the Alliance

The purpose of the arrangement is described as protecting sovereignty, securing mutual defense and security interests, and contributing to stability and security in the Pacific.

This language is important because it establishes a broader security framework within which Fiji would be required to operate. It also reflects Australia's security concerns and the broader security dynamics that may now compel Fiji to take those concerns into account.

We therefore need to recognize the significant security impetus underlying this arrangement and examine what that means for Fiji's own security policy and decision-making.

2. Article 5: Consultation on Security-Related Developments

One of the particularly concerning provisions is Article 5, which deals with consultation.

It provides that, in the event of a security-related development that threatens the sovereignty, peace, or stability of a party, that party shall consult at the request of another party and consider whether measures should be taken in relation to that threat.

This provision raises significant questions.

Whatever Australia may regard as a security-related development could potentially trigger an obligation for Fiji to consult. For example, if Australia's assessment of engagement by China—or by another state or actor—is that such engagement constitutes a security concern, Fiji could find itself obligated to consult Australia about that engagement.

This raises an important question about the extent to which Fiji would retain independent discretion in determining its own foreign-policy and security relationships

3. Article 7: Visiting Forces

Another significant provision is Article 7, concerning visiting forces.

The article provides that the parties shall develop and maintain bilateral and multilateral visiting-forces agreements and arrangements as necessary to facilitate and support activities conducted pursuant to Articles 4, 5, and 6. Article 4 concerns cooperation, Article 5 concerns consultation, and Article 6 concerns mutual defense, including circumstances involving an

armed attack on a party. The inclusion of visiting-forces arrangements therefore warrants careful consideration.

The key question is: to what extent could these arrangements affect Fiji's own military and security structure? **This is particularly significant given Fiji's history and the implications that militarization and securitization have had for its politics, constitutional order, rule of law, and democracy.**

4. Article 10: Performance of Obligations and Existing Agreements Article 10,

particularly subsection 2, also raises significant concerns.

It provides that the treaty is not intended to affect a party's rights and obligations under other agreements in force at the time that party consents to be bound by the treaty. However, where a party identifies an inconsistency between the treaty and another agreement, the parties shall consult upon request.

This provision becomes particularly important in the context of **Fiji's existing obligations under the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty.**

A question therefore arises regarding what happens if arrangements concerning visiting forces, mutual defense, or cooperation intersect with **Australia's AUKUS arrangements, including its plans involving nuclear-powered submarines.**

The concern is that Fiji could find itself in a position where it must consult or negotiate over obligations that it has already undertaken under existing regional agreements. That possibility deserves particularly careful consideration given the long history of nuclear testing in the Pacific and its continuing legacy for Pacific peoples.

5. Article 11: Disputes and the Meaning of the "Pacific Way"

Article 11 addresses disputes between the parties. Subsection 2 provides that the parties commit to conduct consultations and negotiations in accordance with Article 11 in a manner that honors the Pacific Way. The reference to the Pacific Way is significant because the concept is generally associated with consensus-oriented approaches to decision-making and regional relations. However, the way in which the Pacific Way is incorporated into this arrangement raises questions about how the concept is being defined and operationalized.

Does this arrangement genuinely preserve the Pacific Way and its historical association with self-determination, consensus, and Pacific-led decision-making? Or is the concept being redefined and conditioned within a particular security framework?

These are important questions because the meaning attributed to the Pacific Way within the treaty could have implications for how Pacific states exercise their sovereignty and conduct regional negotiations.

6. Article 12: Accession and the Expansion of the Treaty Article 12

concerns signature, ratification, and accession.

Subsection 3 provides that the parties may, by unanimous consent, invite another Pacific state that can further the purposes and principles of the treaty and contribute to the security of the Pacific to accede to the treaty.

Subsection 4 provides that accession by a Pacific state is subject to acceptance by the existing parties. This means that an arrangement that begins as a bilateral treaty has the potential to become a much broader multilateral arrangement.

This is significant because there are already bilateral security arrangements involving Australia and other Pacific Island countries, including arrangements with Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, as well as anticipated arrangements with other Pacific states.

The question therefore arises: What would this treaty mean by those existing and emerging bilateral arrangements?

Furthermore, multilateral arrangements introduce different dynamics of consultation and negotiation. Why should Fiji be placed in a position where it could potentially facilitate or usher in a wider multilateral security framework across the Pacific?

This warrants careful consideration

7. Article 13: The Depository

Article 13 concerns the depository of the treaty and provides for the Government of Australia to serve in that capacity.

This raises an important symbolic and practical question:

Why should Australia be the sole depository of this arrangement?

If this is genuinely a partnership between Pacific states, should Fiji not at least be considered as a co-depository?

The designation of Australia as the depository may carry symbolic significance concerning where authority and institutional responsibility ultimately reside. It raises the broader question of who is in the driver's seat of the arrangement.

8. Article 15: Duration and Withdrawal

Article 15 deals with duration and withdrawal.

The first subsection provides that the treaty shall remain in force indefinitely, while a party may cease to be a party one year after providing written notice of withdrawal to the depository. The second subsection provides that the treaty remains in force for the other parties if one party withdraws. This raises significant concern regarding the collective bargaining position of Pacific Island countries.

If individual states can withdraw while the treaty continues for the remaining parties, the arrangement could potentially contribute to a situation in which Pacific states are negotiating individually rather than maintaining a collective regional position.

This could have implications for the leverage that Pacific countries have historically sought to exercise through regional solidarity.

9. Article 16: Amendments and the Ten-Year Review Period

Finally, Article 16 addresses amendments. It provides that after the treaty has been in force for ten years, the parties may, if any of them requests, consult for the purpose of reviewing the treaty, having regard to the factors then affecting peace and security in the Pacific. The ten-year period raises an important concern. Geopolitical circumstances can change rapidly. Security conditions, regional relationships, strategic interests, and the broader international environment may change considerably over a period of ten years. Locking the treaty into such a long period before a formal review mechanism is available could therefore limit Fiji's and the Pacific's ability to respond to changing circumstances. The concern is that Fiji and the wider Pacific could find themselves rigidly constrained by a ten-year arrangement, even if the geopolitical conditions under which the treaty was concluded have changed substantially.

The Fiji-Australia Union

The terminology itself warrants consideration. Although the arrangement is titled the “Vuvale Union,” the instrument contains numerous references to itself as a treaty. This distinction is significant. Describing the arrangement as a “union,” while simultaneously creating a legally binding treaty framework, may obscure the significance of the obligations being assumed by Fiji.

Fiji therefore has before it two treaties of considerable significance. This places a substantial responsibility not only upon the Government to properly represent the interests of the Fijian people, but also upon the Government to ensure that the Fijian public fully understands the obligations, limitations, and long-term implications of such arrangements.

The following provisions therefore warrant scrutiny and, in several instances, renegotiation or amendment.

1. Article 2 — The Vuvale Union

Article 2, titled “Vuvale Union,” provides that the parties commit to move forward in partnership grounded in the Pacific Way.

It identifies four areas of cooperation:

1. Strengthening prosperity and resilience;
2. Enhancing cultural and people connections;
3. Advancing climate security; and
4. Cultivating and sustaining a culture of peace.

While these objectives appear broadly positive, there is an important question concerning whose prosperity and resilience are being advanced.

The language does not specifically identify the prosperity of the Fijian people or the national development interests of Fiji. Instead, it adopts broader language concerning prosperity and resilience. This raises a fundamental question: To what extent are the objectives of the Vuvale Union aligned with Fiji's own national development priorities and, more importantly, with the interests of the people of Fiji?

Such **alignment** should be explicit rather than assumed.

2. Article 3 — Prosperity and People

Article 3 further addresses prosperity and people. Under subsection 2, the parties commit to **integrating their economies** and deepening links between their peoples, including in support of the Pacific region.

This language warrants considerable scrutiny.

There is an extensive body of literature and scholarship concerning the limitations of attempts to **integrate Pacific economies through conventional neoliberal economic frameworks**. Pacific economies possess structural, geographic, social, and developmental characteristics that distinguish them from larger developed economies. Consequently, the ambition to integrate Pacific economies should not be treated as an inherently beneficial objective without examining the terms on which such integration occurs.

Similarly, **Article 3** refers to deepening the economic and human-development partnership through enhanced economic growth and security. The concept of economic growth itself is increasingly subject to critical examination in global development literature. Economic growth cannot simply be understood through the same framework across countries with fundamentally different economic structures.

The implications for Pacific Island countries are particularly important. Fiji's development needs cannot necessarily be reduced to a conventional model of economic growth developed for larger or more industrialized economies.

The Government should therefore clarify what economic growth means within this treaty, whose interests that growth is intended to serve, and how human development and the wellbeing of Pacific peoples will be protected.

3. Article 4 — Climate and Peace

Article 4, concerning climate and peace, provides an important recognition of climate interests and the Pacific's longstanding concern with climate change and climate action.

However, subsection 3 raises significant concern. It identifies circumstances that could threaten or undermine the individual or collective security of the parties or the Pacific region, including third-party military or other security bases, ongoing presence and arrangements, or visits.

This provision requires careful consideration because of its potential implications for Fiji's independent foreign-policy relationships. In particular, the provision could have implications for Fiji's engagement with countries such as China and other external partners. The Government should therefore explain precisely how this provision would operate and what circumstances could trigger the obligations contemplated by it.

This is fundamentally a question of sovereignty, foreign-policy independence, and selfdetermination. The provision should therefore be reconsidered and, if necessary, renegotiated so that Fiji's ability to maintain independent relationships with other states is not unnecessarily constrained.

Critical infrastructure and technology -Article 4, subsection 5, concerns the protection of critical infrastructure and technology. This also requires careful examination because Fiji may seek external partnerships for the development of public infrastructure and technological capacity. Such partnerships should not inadvertently become subject to restrictions merely because another party considers them to constitute a security concern.

Obligations affecting Fiji's foreign policy

Subsection 7 provides that neither party shall act in a manner that would undermine its ability to meet its obligations under the article. The breadth of this language raises an important question: could Fiji's engagement with another international partner subsequently be regarded as inconsistent with its obligations under the treaty?

If so, the provision could have consequences for Fiji's independent foreign policy.

This concern is particularly significant because these provisions appear within an article ostensibly concerned with climate and peace. Matters concerning security, third-party relationships, and foreign-policy obligations should therefore be transparent and expressly defined rather than embedded within broader climate and peace commitments.

4. Article 5 — Pacific Regionalism

Article 5, subsection 1(a), refers to bolstering the Pacific Islands Forum as the apex of regional architecture. Fiji's regional history demonstrates that the Pacific has developed and utilized other regional institutions and mechanisms. Fiji played an important role in the development and positioning of the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF). The PIDF provided a regional space through which Pacific governments could advance climaterelated concerns and other development priorities independently of Australia and New Zealand. The concern, therefore, is not necessarily with strengthening the Pacific Islands Forum, but with language that potentially positions it as the only legitimate or relevant apex regional architecture. The Pacific should retain the ability to develop and participate in regional institutions that reflect Pacific priorities and provide spaces for Pacific states to engage independently.

The Pacific Way

Article 5 also refers to the peaceful resolution of disputes through the Pacific Way based on consensus-based decision-making. This wording requires examination. There is a meaningful distinction between consensus-oriented decision-making and requiring formal consensus as

the basis for regional decision-making. Defining the Pacific Way in overly narrow terms could unintentionally redefine an important regional concept. This provision should therefore be reconsidered to ensure that the treaty itself does not impose a restrictive definition of Pacific regionalism.

Rules-based trade and investment

Article 5 also refers to efforts to deepen rules-based trade and investment. This language requires greater specificity. Rules governing international trade and investment are frequently developed through systems and institutions outside the Pacific and may not adequately reflect the circumstances of Pacific economies. Accordingly, any commitment to rules-based trade and investment should expressly recognize the need for arrangements that are: Pacific-sensitive; fair and equitable; responsive to the structural realities of Pacific economies; and capable of enabling Pacific countries to participate as equal partners. Without such safeguards, rules-based trade and investment may perpetuate existing asymmetries between Pacific economies and much larger economies such as Australia and New Zealand. Article 5 also refers to cooperation through the Vuvale Union contributing to broader regional development and security. The concern here is the relative emphasis on security without an equally explicit commitment to human development and the development and wellbeing of Pacific Island peoples. Regional development should not be defined primarily through a security framework.

5. Article 6 — The Vuvale Forum

Article 6 establishes the Vuvale Forum. Subsection 3 provides that the chairs may invite traditional, religious, community, and business leaders to participate in a session of the Vuvale Forum.

The use of the word **"may"** is significant.

If the Vuvale Union is genuinely intended to promote people-to-people connections and engagement beyond government-to-government relations, participation by civil society and community organizations should not be discretionary. The language should instead establish a clear expectation that the chairs should invite relevant traditional, religious, community, business, and civil-society representatives.

A genuine people-to-people partnership requires structures that enable people and communities to participate meaningfully in the relationship, rather than relying predominantly on state-to-state engagement.

I therefore recommend that this provision be amended to strengthen the institutional role of civil society and community participation.

6. Article 7 — The Work Plan

Article 7 refers to the development, maintenance, and oversight of a Vuvale Union work plan for the phased, long-term implementation of the parties' obligations and commitments under the treaty. A fundamental concern is that the Vuvale Union work plan is not sufficiently transparent or publicly available at the time of this submission. This is a significant issue.

Promises, commitments, and political declarations can be made between governments, but the work plan is the mechanism through which those commitments are translated into actual implementation.

The Fijian Government should therefore provide greater transparency regarding:

the contents of the work plan; the proposed implementation timetable; the

obligations of each party; the mechanisms for monitoring implementation; the

financial implications; the institutional responsibilities involved; and the way the

Fijian public will be informed and consulted.

Given the long-term nature of the treaty, there should be adequate time for public scrutiny and discussion of the work plan before commitments are implemented.

7. Article 8 — Settlement of Disputes

Article 8 establishes provisions concerning the settlement of disputes.

While the article provides for the parties to address disputes in accordance with their obligations under the treaty, greater clarity appears necessary concerning the precise institutional mechanisms through which disputes will be resolved.

The Government should clarify:

who determines whether a dispute has arisen; what

institutional mechanism has jurisdiction; what

processes are available to the parties; whether

independent mechanisms are available; what

happens while a dispute remains unresolved; and

whether Fiji retains sufficient discretion to protect its

national interests during the dispute process.

These mechanisms should be transparent and sufficiently detailed to provide certainty to both parties.

8. Article 9 — Amendments

Article 9 provides for amendments through written mutual consent. Given the breadth and long-term character of the treaty, the amendment mechanism is particularly important.

Fiji should ensure that future governments retain a meaningful capacity to respond to changing national, regional, and international circumstances.

The Government should therefore explain whether the amendment mechanism provides sufficient flexibility for Fiji to address circumstances that may not have been foreseeable at the time of entry into force.

9. Article 10 — Entry into Force and Termination

Article 10 addresses the status, entry into force, and termination of the treaty.

Of particular concern is the provision that either party may terminate the treaty through written notice, with termination taking effect 24 months after the date on which the notice is received. A 24-month termination period is considerable. Given the importance of sovereignty, foreign-policy independence, and the changing nature of international relationships in the Pacific, a shorter period—such as 12 months—could be considered more appropriate. The Government should therefore reconsider whether a 24-month period is necessary and whether it provides sufficient flexibility for Fiji to respond to circumstances affecting its national and regional interests.

Oceania of Peace Treaty – To be designed by and proposed by Fiji to the region

I finally propose here the development of an authentic Oceania of Peace Treaty, designed and initiated by the Government of Fiji and subsequently proposed to the wider Pacific region. More specifically, this treaty could be initiated and endorsed by this committee before being presented to the Parliament of Fiji and the Prime Minister for further development. It would be a Fiji-designed treaty that places at its core a **Code of Conduct**, embedded within a regional framework and proposed particularly to external powers operating in the Pacific.

The central feature of the treaty would be this **Code of Conduct.** It would affirm and reinforce the commitments already made by countries within the region, including Australia and New Zealand. For example, the principles and obligations of the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty established in the 1980s should continue to be observed. At the same time, countries such as Australia should reconsider ambitions related to nuclear-powered submarines, including arrangements such as AUKUS and other security initiatives that may contribute to the escalation of securitisation and militarisation in the Pacific region.

Equally, the treaty could seek to bind countries such as China through this same code of conduct. This would obligate China to immediately cease the use of the Pacific Ocean as a testing ground for long-range ballistic missile tests. The treaty could also apply similar expectations to other powers, including the United States and any state that has used the Pacific region in various ways as a testing ground for demonstrating the strength and capabilities of its weapons systems. Under the proposed code of conduct, such activities would be discouraged or prohibited.

I further propose that the treaty be titled the Oceania of Peace Treaty. The term Oceania is significant because it serves as a symbol of Pacific self-determination and reflects an independent regional identity. It represents a self-determined positioning that Fiji can advance and champion within the region. Through this initiative, Fiji could bring Pacific nations together and encourage external powers to become signatories to an authentic Oceania of

Peace Treaty. In doing so, the treaty would seek to bind external partners to a genuine and meaningful commitment to peace, stability, and cooperation in and with the Pacific region.

I now address the reason why I argue that the Fiji-Australia Union and the **Ocean of Peace Alliance** should not carry Fijianised terms. While I understand the common argument that such words were introduced by Fiji, similar to the proposition of Talanoa Diplomacy, Fiji has developed a habit of introducing indigenous Fijian words into statecraft and diplomatic nomenclature without adequately consulting its indigenous people. Furthermore, consultation has often not extended to the broader community of citizens who actively speak, practice, and sustain the language.

By this, I mean that the issue is not limited solely to indigenous custodians of the language. It also concerns fluent speakers and practitioners of the language, namely the citizens of Fiji who keep the language alive through everyday use. The introduction of indigenous terms into statecraft should therefore involve meaningful engagement not only with indigenous custodians but also with the wider linguistic community.

This concern is not new. A similar argument was made regarding Talanoa Diplomacy under the Bainimarama Government. At that time, the government adopted and promoted an indigenous term while simultaneously being criticised for undermining indigenous institutions, most notably through the dismantling of the **Great Council of Chiefs (GCC).** Subsequently, the concept of talanoa was taken to regional and international levels without extensive consultation with regional neighbours, even though the term itself also carries broader regional meanings. It was then incorporated into international and climate diplomacy without what could be considered free, prior, and informed consent from its cultural custodians and stakeholders.

In my view, a similar pattern is now emerging under the current coalition government led by Prime Minister Rabuka. The proposal to incorporate Fijian words and vernacular expressions into statecraft appears to lack a sufficiently robust threshold of consultation with indigenous custodians. Equally important, it has not meaningfully engaged the broader community of language practitioners and speakers, whose role in maintaining and sustaining the language is equally significant.

The call to reject or reconsider the use of Fijian terms in these initiatives stems from a deeper concern about the context in which these terms are being deployed. We are introducing Fijian concepts into diplomatic statecraft that is primarily structured around transnational engagements rather than relational forms of interaction. In doing so, there is a risk that the meanings of these terms become redefined through transactional diplomatic processes.

Such a development could diminish not only the original meanings of these words but also erode the integrity of the indigeneity embedded within them. As these concepts are

increasingly detached from their cultural and social foundations, they risk being transformed into diplomatic instruments that no longer reflect the values, relationships, and cultural significance from which they originated.

For these reasons, I argue that the current use of such terms should be reconsidered and, where necessary, rescinded. At the very least, if these terms are to be incorporated into diplomatic statecraft, their adoption should first be subjected to a process of **Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC).** Such consultation should involve both the indigenous custodians of the language and the wider community of Fijian speakers who continue to practice, sustain, and give meaning to it.

In sum, I reiterate the overall position of this submission to;

1. Insist that the Fijian parliament to **reject the Ocean of Peace Alliance**
2. Insist **a re-negotiation** of the Fiji-Australia Union
3. **Propose** an authentic Oceania of Peace Treaty

Vinaka saka vakalevu,

Jope Tarai



02/10/2026

Mr. Reg Sandy

COVER LETTER

Reg Sandy

Nadi, Fiji
Telephone: 2795927

25 September 2026

The Chair and Members
Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence
Parliament of Fiji
Suva

Re: Submission on the Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty)

Dear Chair and Members,

I write to submit my submission on the proposed Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty) between Fiji and Australia. The submission is attached and is titled DEMOCRATIC SAFEGUARDS AND CONDITIONS ON THE RATIFICATION OF THE OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE ("VEITACINI TREATY") .

This submission is offered in a spirit of respect and friendship. It is not intended as a criticism of Australia, but rather as a strong affirmation of the democratic principles and values of consultative governance that both our nations hold dear. It is my hope that this perspective can contribute to a stronger, more transparent, and more mutually respectful partnership.

The submission argues that the Treaty's Article 6 mutual defence commitment is a commitment to war and should not be ratified without democratic safeguards, public education, and the informed consent of the Fijian people. It proposes a series of procedural and substantive amendments, and puts forward a constructive alternative: that Fiji should seek a non-binding security framework on the Australia–Ukraine model, consistent with Australia's own most recent treaty practice with a nation at war.

The submission is grounded in Fiji's own declared foreign policy. On 24 September 2026, the President of Fiji, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, told the United Nations General Assembly that Fiji "will not be drawn into choosing between competing global power blocs," that "international law is not optional and peace cannot be secured by power alone," and that "our ocean must not become a theatre in which others settle their rivalries." The submission asks the Committee to ensure that the Treaty is consistent with those words.

The submission also asks the Committee to ensure that any commitment under Article 6 is preceded by consultation with Fiji's Great Council of Chiefs (GCC). More than 60% of Fiji's population are indigenous iTaukei, for whom the GCC is at the apex of their social system. In addition, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) requires the involvement of the key institutions of indigenous peoples in all important matters affecting them. A decision to commit Fiji to war is such a matter.

The submission further recommends that a parliamentary delegation from Fiji visit the American territories—Guam, American Samoa and the Northern Mariana Islands—and the Micronesian states covered by the Compact of Free Association with the United States (the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands and Palau). The delegation should assess how their responsibilities as US citizens, and, for Micronesians, their belonging to the Compact of Free Association with the US, have affected local communities. Their youth have joined US military forces and have died in America's foreign wars. The delegation should examine how local communities have adjusted to this, and what measures their governments have put in place to safeguard the interests of families and communities during times of great emotional stress.

In the arrivals concourse at Pohnpei Airport in the Federated States of Micronesia, portraits of citizens killed while serving in the military are displayed. Why is there a need for this? Should Fiji be doing the same, posting pictures of all its citizens killed while defending Australian interests at the arrivals hall at Nadi International Airport, so that we do not forget their sacrifice? These are the issues we need to think through before committing ourselves to the treaty.

I respectfully request that the Committee:

· Accept this submission for consideration;
· Conduct public hearings in Nadi, Ba, Lautoka, Suva, Nausori and the maritime regions;
· Release information material in simple English, with translations into iTaukei and Hindi, so that all Fijians can understand what the Treaty means;
· Formally recognise that the Great Council of Chiefs must be consulted before Fiji commits to any war, consistent with UNDRIP; and
· Authorise a parliamentary delegation to visit the American territories and Freely Associated States to study the military-service, family-welfare and memorialisation issues raised in this submission.

Yours faithfully,

Reg Sandy
Nadi, Fiji

SUBMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENT OF FIJI

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

DEMOCRATIC SAFEGUARDS AND CONDITIONS ON THE RATIFICATION OF THE OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE ("VEITACINI TREATY")

BEFORE FIJI COMMITS ITS SONS AND DAUGHTERS TO WAR, THE PARLIAMENT OF FIJI, THE GREAT COUNCIL OF CHIEFS AND THE PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM MUST DECIDE BY CONSENSUS — A CALL FOR DEMOCRATIC SAFEGUARDS, PUBLIC EDUCATION AND CONDITIONS ON RATIFICATION

Submitted by:

R Sandy
Nadi, Fiji
Telephone: 2795927

Date: 25 September 2026

Submission regarding: The proposed Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty) between Fiji and Australia

This submission is made in a personal capacity and reflects the views of the author. It does not represent the views of any organisation.

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SUBMISSION

DEMOCRATIC SAFEGUARDS AND CONDITIONS ON THE RATIFICATION OF THE OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE ("VEITACINI TREATY")

HEADING: BEFORE FIJI COMMITS ITS SONS AND DAUGHTERS TO WAR, THE PARLIAMENT OF FIJI, THE GREAT COUNCIL OF CHIEFS AND THE PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM MUST DECIDE BY CONSENSUS — A CALL FOR DEMOCRATIC SAFEGUARDS, PUBLIC EDUCATION AND CONDITIONS ON RATIFICATION

PREAMBLE

This submission concerns the proposed Ocean of Peace Alliance, also known as the Veitacini Treaty.[1]

This submission is made in a spirit of profound respect for the enduring friendship between Australia and Fiji. It is not, in any way, an anti-Australian document. On the contrary, it is a pro-democracy submission, rooted in the belief that the strongest bonds between nations are forged through a shared commitment to democratic ideals and the principles of consultative governance. It is this shared foundation that I seek to uphold and strengthen.

This submission does not seek to reject the Treaty outright. It seeks to ensure that, if Fiji is to enter into it, it does so as a democracy, as a sovereign state, and as a Pacific nation — not in haste, and not without the informed consent of the Fijian people.

The Ocean of Peace Alliance is, in form and substance, a collective defence alliance. Its Article 6 commits each Party to "act to meet the common danger" in the event of an armed attack on any Party "within the Pacific." That is a commitment to war. It is the most consequential commitment a sovereign state can make. It cannot be entered into without democratic safeguards.

This submission proposes a series of procedural and substantive safeguards — not as delay tactics, but as democratic responsibility. These safeguards are consistent with Fiji's Constitution, with the Pacific Way, with the Boe Declaration,[2] with the Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration,[3] and with established democratic practice around the world.

This submission also proposes a constructive alternative: that Fiji should seek a non-binding security framework on the Australia–Ukraine model — the same model Australia itself applied to a nation at war just days ago — rather than the binding mutual defence treaty currently proposed. This alternative preserves Fiji's sovereignty, aligns with Fiji's non-aligned foreign policy, and eliminates the structural asymmetry that places Fiji in a subordinate legal position.

This submission further insists that Fiji's Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) must be included among the bodies that must be consulted before Fiji goes to war. More than 60% of Fiji's population are indigenous iTaukei, for whom the GCC is at the apex of their social system. In addition, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) requires the involvement of the key institutions of indigenous peoples in all important matters affecting them. A decision to commit Fiji to war is unquestionably such a matter.

This submission also recommends that a parliamentary delegation from Fiji visit the American territories—Guam, American Samoa and the Northern Mariana Islands—and the Micronesian states covered by the Compact of Free Association with the United States (the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands and Palau). The delegation should assess how

their responsibilities as US citizens, and, for Micronesians, their belonging to the Compact of Free Association with the US, have affected local communities. Their youth have joined US military forces and have died in America's foreign wars. The delegation should examine how local communities have adjusted to this, and what measures their governments have put in place to safeguard the interests of families and communities during times of great emotional stress.

In the arrivals concourse at Pohnpei Airport in the Federated States of Micronesia, portraits of citizens killed while serving in the military are displayed. Why is there a need for this? Should Fiji be doing the same, posting pictures of all its citizens killed while defending Australian interests at the arrivals hall at Nadi International Airport, so that we do not forget their sacrifice? These are the issues we need to think through before committing ourselves to the treaty.

This submission is further grounded in Fiji's own stated foreign policy. On 24 September 2026, the President of Fiji, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, told the United Nations General Assembly that "when the world asks small states to choose between competing power blocs, Fiji chooses principles and we choose the Charter." He stated that "international law is not optional and peace cannot be secured by power alone," and that for small states the Charter's principles of "sovereign equality, territorial integrity and peaceful settlement of disputes" are "the safeguards against a world in which the size of military strength decides whose rights matter." He declared that "our ocean must not become a theatre in which others settle their rivalries."[4]

The safeguards proposed in this submission do not depart from Fiji's foreign policy. They give it effect. A treaty that binds Fiji indefinitely, denies it independent adjudication, makes Australia the Depositary, and commits Fiji to war without parliamentary consent is difficult to reconcile with the President's words. This submission asks the Committee to ensure that Fiji's treaty practice matches Fiji's stated principles.

A PERSONAL PREFACE: MY FAMILY'S SERVICE AND WHY IT MATTERS

I make this submission as a Fijian citizen and as a descendant of Australian-born settlers who answered the Commonwealth-wide call during the First World War. My maternal grandfather and his brother enlisted in the Fiji military contingent and served in France and Belgium. My maternal grand uncle was awarded a Military Cross and a Bar. My grand-aunt also served, as a nursing sister. My grandfather returned from the war with what we would now recognise as post-traumatic stress disorder. The horrors of war did not end for him at the armistice; they followed him home and shortened his life. War is not an abstract commitment. It is a wound that passes from generation to generation.

That history teaches a clear lesson. Back in World War One, military service was voluntary. It was not a standing treaty obligation to Australia. It did not commit Fiji's Parliament or people to future wars. The proposed treaty would. That is precisely why it requires democratic consent — not in medals and

memorials, but in lives shortened, in minds wounded, and in families that carry the cost long after the parades are over.

PART I: THE PROCESS APPEARS RUSHED

The Treaty was endorsed by Pacific Islands Forum Leaders in 2025 and is now before this Committee in 2026. That is a short period for a treaty of this magnitude.

A collective defence alliance is not an ordinary agreement. It commits Fiji to war. It places foreign military personnel on Fijian soil under Article 7. It constrains Fiji's foreign policy under Article 10. It gives Australia a veto over which Pacific states may join under Article 12. It makes Australia the Depositary under Article 13. It binds Fiji indefinitely under Article 15. It denies Fiji recourse to any court or tribunal under Article 11.

These are profound commitments. They deserve profound scrutiny. The process appears rushed. The public has not been educated. The implications have not been fully explored. Civil society was not consulted during the initial formulation of the Treaty. No public hearings have been held. Information material in simple English, with translations into iTaukei and Hindi, has not been released widely. The Committee should take the time necessary to examine the Treaty properly.

A further reason for caution is that Australia's own most recent security agreement — the Australia–Ukraine Bilateral Security Agreement signed on 23 September 2026 — is legally non-binding, has a ten-year duration, and contains no mutual defence obligations.[7] President Zelensky described it as "the strongest document between our countries." If Australia's strongest security commitment to a nation at war does not include a mutual defence obligation, Fiji should ask why it is being asked to accept a binding mutual defence commitment that Ukraine was not asked to accept.

PART II: THE GOVERNMENT'S INTERPRETATION IS CONTESTED

The Government's Written Analysis presents a particular interpretation of the Treaty. That interpretation is not the only one, and it is not the most faithful one.

1. "Shared Sovereignty as a Capability Multiplier"

The Government's Analysis states that the Vuvale Union "views shared sovereignty as a capability multiplier."[8] This phrase should be examined carefully.

Sovereignty is not a military asset to be pooled without consent. A treaty that commits Fiji to war without parliamentary approval does not multiply sovereignty — it mortgages it. The Government calls this "shared sovereignty." But sovereignty shared without democratic consent is not multiplied — it is transferred. The question is not whether Fiji gains capability, but who decides when that capability is used.

The President of Fiji has himself rejected the premise of this argument. Addressing the UN General Assembly on 24 September 2026, he stated plainly: "peace cannot be secured by power alone."[4] If security cannot be secured by power alone, it cannot be secured by pooling capability into a larger power's military framework. The Government's phrase "capability multiplier" describes a military calculation. The President describes a principled one. The Committee should ask which represents Fiji's true position.

2. "Commitments Are Not New"

The Government's Analysis claims that the treaty's defence commitments "are not new, as Fiji and Australia's stand since WW1 speaks to the depth of their mutual trust."[9] This is misleading.

World War One service was voluntary, ad hoc, and conducted under British imperial command. It was not a standing bilateral mutual defence treaty. It did not commit Fiji's Parliament or people to future wars. Article 6 is new in kind. It is a standing mutual defence commitment. That is precisely why it requires democratic consent.

My own family's history demonstrates this. They volunteered. They served. They returned. But their service did not bind Fiji to future wars. The proposed treaty would. And as I have noted, my grandfather returned with the psychological wounds of war. That is the reality the Government's romantic invocation of WWI conceals.

3. The Australia–Ukraine Precedent: Non-Binding Is the Standard

The Government's Analysis presents the mutual defence commitment in Article 6 as a natural expression of the Vuvale relationship. Australia's own treaty practice contradicts this.

The Australia–Ukraine Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA), signed on 23 September 2026, is legally non-binding, has a ten-year duration, and contains no mutual defence obligations.[7] President Zelensky described it as "the strongest document between our countries." All 28 bilateral security arrangements Ukraine has concluded with its partners share these characteristics: legally non-binding, ten-year duration, no mutual defence obligations. This is the model Australia itself uses for its most urgent security partnerships.

If Australia's "strongest" security commitment to a nation under active invasion does not include a war obligation, there is no principled basis for demanding a binding mutual defence pact from Fiji, a nation not under attack. Fiji should accept nothing less — and nothing more binding — than the standard Australia applies to a nation at war.

This precedent transforms the debate. The question is no longer whether Fiji should accept the binding treaty or reject it entirely. The question is why Fiji is being asked to accept a more binding commitment than Ukraine — a nation at

war — was asked to accept. The Australia–Ukraine BSA demonstrates that a non-binding framework is not a weaker option. It is Australia's own preferred option for its most urgent security partnerships.

4. The "Ocean of Peace" Has Been Co-Opted

The Government's Analysis treats the Ocean of Peace Declaration as a settled framework that the Vuvale Union simply "embeds" and "operationalises."[10] This is a unilateral interpretation that ignores the Declaration's origins and contested meaning.

The Ocean of Peace Declaration was endorsed by Pacific Islands Forum Leaders in September 2025, after a two-year consultation process. It was explicitly framed as a Pacific-led commitment to insulating the region from great power competition — a "zone of peace, free from conflict and rivalry." As the East Asia Forum analysis puts it, the Declaration "was meant to guide and shape regional responses to growing strategic competition."[11]

The Australian government has itself described the Declaration as a demonstration of "significant strategic alignment between Fiji and Australia" — language that implies alignment against something, even if China is not named. By embedding the Declaration in a defence treaty with mutual defence obligations, the Government transforms a Pacific-wide aspiration for non-alignment into a bilateral security pact that could draw Fiji into great-power conflict.

The Pacific Conference of Churches has warned against "militarising" the Ocean of Peace vision. Its General Secretary, Reverend James Bhagwan, has urged Pacific leaders to ensure the vision "is not overtaken by military and security interests."[12] The Government's Analysis does not acknowledge this critique, nor does it explain how a mutual defence treaty is consistent with a declaration intended to keep the region free from conflict and rivalry.

The President of Fiji reinforced this concern at the UN General Assembly on 24 September 2026. He noted that the Pacific "continued to carry the legacy of militarisation and nuclear testing," observing that "our ocean carries the memory of decisions made elsewhere, but suffered by Pacific peoples." He stated: "Our message to all partners is clear: the Pacific welcomes friendship, investment and genuine cooperation. But our ocean must not become a theatre in which others settle their rivalries."[4]

A mutual defence treaty with a party to AUKUS and ANZUS does exactly what the President said must not happen. It makes the Pacific a theatre in which others' rivalries may be settled — with Fiji legally obliged to participate.

The Ocean of Peace was not meant to be militarised. It was meant to keep the Pacific free from conflict and rivalry. The Government's interpretation is not the only one, and it is not the most faithful one.

5. The Capability Imbalance and Reciprocity Problem

The Government claims "shared sovereignty as a capability multiplier," but Australia's military is vastly larger and more advanced. Fiji's RFMF is configured for peacekeeping and humanitarian response, not conventional warfare.

The Fiji Times has noted the "obvious" imbalance between Australia's military and Fiji's RFMF, which is "structured around territorial security, peacekeeping and humanitarian response rather than conventional warfare."[13] The Government's Analysis does not explain what Fiji could realistically contribute if Australia were attacked.

The treaty's reciprocity is legal, not practical. If Australia were attacked, what could Fiji realistically contribute? The treaty creates a legal obligation without a realistic capacity to fulfil it — and without any independent adjudication if Australia fails to honour its side.

6. The Structural Asymmetry

Article 15 binds Fiji indefinitely. Article 11 denies Fiji recourse to any court or tribunal. Article 13 makes Australia the Depositary. Article 12 gives Australia a veto over which Pacific states may join.

Taken together, these provisions place Fiji in a permanently subordinate legal position. Fiji cannot exit easily, cannot adjudicate disputes, cannot control who joins, and cannot appeal to any court. That is not a partnership of equals.

A non-binding framework, by contrast, eliminates the legal subordination while preserving practical defence cooperation. As Harvard research on non-binding agreements notes, such instruments allow both powerful and small states to "balance flexibility, legitimacy, and control." A non-binding framework would align Fiji with Australia's own most recent treaty practice, preserve Fiji's sovereignty and non-aligned foreign policy, and eliminate the structural asymmetry created by Articles 11, 12, 13, and 15.

The President of Fiji identified precisely this danger at the UN General Assembly. He warned that small states need the Charter's principles of "sovereign equality, territorial integrity and peaceful settlement of disputes" as "safeguards against a world in which the size of military strength decides whose rights matter."[4]

The proposed Treaty moves Fiji in the opposite direction. It places Fiji in a legal relationship in which military size does determine outcomes: Australia sets the terms, holds the veto, serves as Depositary, and cannot be held to account by any court. Article 15 binds Fiji indefinitely; Article 11 denies Fiji any tribunal. These are not the safeguards the President described. They are the arrangement he warned against.

7. The Third-Party Alliance Entanglement Risk

AUKUS, ANZUS,[14] and Australia's deepening alignment with the United

States could draw Fiji into a Taiwan Strait or South China Sea conflict. Fiji must not be drawn into a conflict arising from Australia's other alliance commitments.

This risk is not hypothetical. Former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating has warned that AUKUS is "locking Australia into" potential US-China conflict. He argues Australia is becoming "locked in and locked up to the military prerogatives of the United States," and rejects the proposition that Australia should automatically support the United States in any future conflict involving China and Taiwan. Keating warns that the United States would "certainly lose" such a war and that Australia could be left exposed to retaliation.[15]

If Australia's own former Prime Minister warns that Australia risks being drawn into a war not of its making, Fiji should not sign a treaty that could draw Fiji into the same war. The proposed treaty must expressly exclude any conflict arising from Australia's other alliance commitments, including AUKUS and ANZUS. Article 6 must not become a back door to a Pacific war.

Article 6 should expressly exclude any conflict to which Fiji is not a party. The geographic scope of "within the Pacific" should be defined to exclude the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, the Korean Peninsula, and any area outside the Pacific Islands region as defined by the Pacific Islands Forum.

The Australia–Ukraine BSA demonstrates that Australia is actively deepening military integration with partners engaged in active conflict. This strengthens the case for an explicit exclusion clause in Article 6 to prevent Fiji from being drawn into conflicts arising from Australia's other commitments.

This is not a hypothetical concern raised only by critics of the Treaty. It is the express position of Fiji's Head of State. At the UN General Assembly on 24 September 2026, the President of Fiji said: "our ocean must not become a theatre in which others settle their rivalries."[4] The Committee should ask the Government how Article 6, unamended, is consistent with that instruction.

8. The "Would Act" Ambiguity

The Government may argue Article 6 says "would act," not "shall act," so it is not automatic. Whether Article 6 is automatic or discretionary, it is a mutual defence commitment that can draw Fiji into war. The ambiguity itself is dangerous. If it is not a war commitment, the Treaty should say so plainly. If it is, it requires parliamentary approval and public consent.

9. The "Vuvale" Is Not Reciprocal: Australia's Visa Regime Proves It

The Government's Analysis describes the Vuvale Partnership as grounded in "mutual respect, shared values, and close cooperation."[16] The practice tells a different story.

As Suva lawyer Jaoji Savou has observed, Australia's visa regime is structured to gate out brown, post-colonial neighbours while giving red-carpet digital entry

to predominantly white Western nations. British passport holders receive near-instant electronic clearance without financial proof or travel itineraries. Malaysians — who consistently rank as the number one nationality for visa overstays in Australia — retain access to the streamlined ETA app because Kuala Lumpur has the economic and military leverage to retaliate if stripped of it, including under the Five Power Defence Arrangements.[17]

Fijians, by contrast, must lodge full Subclass 600 applications and prove their worth under the Genuine Temporary Entrant requirement: substantial savings, formal employment letters, property deeds. The system was designed around Western markers of stability. It automatically gates out citizens of developing nations — predominantly brown and formerly colonised populations.[18]

The only reason Australia gives Malaysia that benefit is Malaysian investment and trade. Otherwise Kuala Lumpur would be in the same basket as Suva. As Savou puts it: "Treating Pacific neighbours as risks rather than partners while simultaneously asking us to reject external non-Australian security pacts has become one of Australia's most glaring diplomatic hypocrisies."[19]

This matters for the Treaty. If Australia does not trust Fijians enough to grant them the same visa access it grants Malaysians and Britons, on what basis should Fiji trust Australia with a mutual defence commitment? The visa regime is not a side issue. It is the everyday proof of what the Treaty would formalise: a relationship where Australia sets the terms, and Fiji accepts them.

10. The Reliability of the Partner: Can Australia Deliver?

The Government's Analysis assumes that Australia will honour its commitments under the Treaty. It does not ask whether Australia can. This is a critical omission. Fiji is being asked to make an irrevocable commitment to a partner whose own reliability is in question.

The contradiction between words and deeds. In New York, launching Australia's bid for a UN Security Council seat, Prime Minister Albanese declared: "We listen with respect, we partner as equals and we protect what matters most."[20] The treaty he signed with Fiji contradicts this. It denies Fiji recourse to any international court or tribunal. It binds Fiji indefinitely. It gives Australia a veto over which Pacific states may join. The Fiji Times has described the treaty as "equality in law, inequality in practice."[21] If Australia's word at the UN cannot be reconciled with its treaty text, Fiji should ask which is the true expression of Australian intent.

The President of Fiji has also addressed this directly. He stated at the UN General Assembly that "the Charter does not apply differently according to who is involved or where," and that "Fiji asks the same of every party in every theatre."[4] Fiji should therefore ask of Australia precisely what it asks of every other state: adherence to international law, peaceful settlement of disputes, and respect for sovereign equality. A treaty that exempts the relationship from independent adjudication fails that test.

The military asymmetry is total. Australia has a blue-water navy, fighter jets, submarines, cyber warfare capabilities, and an intelligence network. Its defence budget is in the tens of billions. Fiji's military was designed for territorial security, peacekeeping, and humanitarian assistance — not to fight Australia's wars. If Australia were attacked, Fiji cannot realistically provide matching military force. The treaty creates a legal obligation without a realistic capacity to fulfil it.

Australia itself depends on the United States. Analysts have noted that even if the treaty is enforceable, Australia relies on the US to defend itself and would struggle to defend Fiji alone. Australia's own security is not self-sufficient. Its alliance with the US is its ultimate guarantee. If that guarantee is uncertain, Australia's guarantee to Fiji is doubly uncertain.

The US is not treating Australia's leader seriously. In September, Prime Minister Albanese travelled to New York for the UN General Assembly. No US official greeted him at the airport — not even a low-level protocol officer. The White House press secretary confirmed no bilateral meeting was scheduled. When Albanese delivered his first speech to the UN, the US delegation's seats were empty. Former Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr and others have called this a "snub."[22] This is how Australia's most important strategic ally treats its prime minister. If the US will not send a protocol officer to meet Albanese, what confidence can Fiji have that the US will act to protect Fiji in a crisis?

The logic is inescapable. ANZUS does not provide automatic military protection. It commits to consultation, not guaranteed defence. Its effectiveness depends on the US President's trust in and respect for the Australian leader. If that trust is absent, Australia's ability to secure US support for Fiji is doubtful. A defence treaty backed by a leader who cannot get a bilateral meeting, an airport greeter, or a filled seat at the UN is a blank cheque backed by uncertain credit.

Domestic political risk. Prime Minister Albanese's net satisfaction is at -27%, his worst ever. Labor's primary vote is near historic lows. The next federal election is due by May 2028. Fiji signed a treaty with a prime minister who may not be prime minister when the treaty's obligations are tested. Legal obligations may survive, but political will does not automatically transfer. If Albanese falls, how seriously will a new Canberra leader take Fiji's "Vuvale" promises?[23]

The conclusion for Fiji. Fiji is being asked to commit its sons and daughters to war on the strength of a partner whose own reliability is unproven. The treaty denies Fiji any legal remedy if Australia fails. Fiji must rely entirely on political goodwill — from a partner whose leader is not taken seriously in Washington, whose domestic position is weak, and whose own security depends on an alliance that may not deliver. This is not a partnership of equals. It is a gamble. Before Fiji takes that gamble, Parliament must ask: what evidence is there that Australia can deliver?

11. The Language of Partnership Has Been Used Before: The Lesson of Scotland

The Government's Analysis presents the Vuvale Union as a partnership of equals. History offers a cautionary precedent.

In 1707, Scotland entered what was presented as a voluntary Treaty of Union with England.[24] The language was one of partnership. The reality, according to a growing body of legal opinion now before the United Nations, was absorption. As JPTi and Liberation Scotland have argued at the UN in Geneva, the 1707 Treaty was not a voluntary partnership but an annexation of Scotland into a continuing English state. Scotland's sovereignty was extinguished, its institutions subordinated, and its resources — including North Sea oil and gas — placed under Westminster's control.[25]

A panel of international law experts has concluded that Scotland meets the UN criteria for a Non-Self-Governing Territory.[26] The argument advanced by Sara Salyers of Liberation Scotland and Robert Black KC is that the absence of any genuine voluntary foundation is precisely what proves dependency under international law. A treaty can be signed. It can be ratified. It can use the language of equality. But if one party is structurally subordinate — lacking control over defence, foreign affairs, currency, and constitutional law — the relationship is not a partnership. It is a dependency dressed in partnership language.[27]

Salyers has argued that no United Crown was ever created in 1707, that the Crown of Scotland remains a legal and constitutional reality, and that the Scottish people — the "Community of the Realm" — retain sovereign authority under the Claim of Right.[28] She notes that, for the first time in over 300 years, Hansard in the House of Commons has been forced to record that Scotland did NOT join a territorial union in 1707, merely an economic and political one.[29]

Black KC has described the 1707 Union as a "takeover," not a voluntary partnership, and has noted that the British State has a recorded history of treaty violation — approximately 200 treaties violated over centuries — which justifies the historical description of "Perfidious Albion."[30]

This is directly relevant to the proposed treaty. The Government presents the Vuvale Union as grounded in "mutual respect" and "shared sovereignty." But Australia is the Depositary. Australia holds the accession veto. Fiji is bound indefinitely with no access to independent adjudication. Fiji's military was never designed to fight Australia's wars. The treaty may be equal in law. It is not equal in practice.

The Scotland case does not prove that Fiji is a colony. It proves something more precise and more useful: that treaty language is not determinative. What matters is the legal and practical reality of the relationship. If Fiji cannot exit, cannot adjudicate, cannot control who joins, and cannot match Australia's military capacity, then the Vuvale Union is not a partnership of equals. It is a partnership in name only.

This submission does not claim that Fiji is a colony or that the Scotland case is directly analogous. It claims something narrower and more useful: that treaty

language alone cannot establish whether a relationship is a genuine partnership. The Scotland case demonstrates that partnership language can coexist with structural subordination. That is the lesson Fiji should heed.

This is why the safeguards in this submission matter. They are not obstacles to partnership. They are the conditions of genuine partnership. Without them, Fiji risks repeating a pattern that Scotland is only now, three centuries later, beginning to contest.

PART III: THE CORE DEMAND — PARLIAMENT, GREAT COUNCIL OF CHIEFS AND FORUM CONSENSUS BEFORE WAR, AND A NON-BINDING FRAMEWORK

The single most important safeguard Fiji must secure is this:

No commitment to act under Article 6 of the proposed treaty without the prior approval of the Parliament of Fiji, the Great Council of Chiefs, and the Pacific Islands Forum, by consensus.

This is not a delay tactic. It is a democratic requirement. It is also consistent with the Treaty's own language.

The Treaty's preamble invokes the Pacific Way, that "involves peacefully settling issues, including disputes, through talanoa and consensus-based decision making." Article 11(2) and 11(3) require disputes to be settled "in a manner which honours the Pacific Way." The Treaty cannot invoke the Pacific Way for disputes while bypassing it for war.

Article 2 declares the Parties' "commitment to free and democratic institutions." A Treaty that commits Fiji to war without parliamentary approval would contradict that commitment.

Article 1 speaks of "protect[ing] their sovereignty." A Treaty that bypasses Fiji's Parliament on the most consequential decision a state can make does not protect Fiji's sovereignty — it undermines it.

The demand is therefore not an amendment to the Treaty's substance. It is a demand that the Treaty be read consistently with its own principles.

The inclusion of the Great Council of Chiefs is not an add-on. More than 60% of Fiji's population are indigenous iTaukei, for whom the GCC is at the apex of their social system. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) requires the involvement of the key institutions of indigenous peoples in all important matters affecting them. A decision to go to war is among the most important matters that can affect an indigenous people. The GCC must therefore be formally consulted before Fiji commits to any war.

The practical effect: any Article 6 action would require:

· A two-thirds majority in the Parliament of Fiji, or a cross-party consensus in the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, or a national referendum where time permits;
· Formal consultation with, and where required the consent of, the Great Council of Chiefs, consistent with UNDRIP;
· Prior consideration by the Pacific Islands Forum, with Fiji not acting without Forum consensus;
· Consistency with Article 51 of the UN Charter[31] and, where possible, UN Security Council authorization.

The President of Fiji has stated Fiji's position with unmistakable clarity. "When the world asks small states to choose between competing power blocs," he told the UN General Assembly, "Fiji chooses principles and we choose the Charter. We choose international law. We choose dialogue over coercion, human dignity over domination and cooperation over confrontation."[4]

A binding mutual defence treaty with one bloc is not a choice for principles. It is a choice for a bloc. The non-binding framework proposed in this submission is the treaty form that matches the President's words: cooperation without alignment, partnership without subordination, and defence cooperation without a standing commitment to war.

In addition to these procedural safeguards, Fiji should seek a non-binding security framework on the Australia–Ukraine model. The Treaty should be restructured as a legally non-binding framework for defence cooperation, with a ten-year duration and no mutual defence obligations. This would:

· Align Fiji with Australia's own most recent treaty practice;
· Preserve Fiji's sovereignty and non-aligned foreign policy;
· Eliminate the structural asymmetry created by Articles 11, 12, 13, and 15;
· Provide a constructive alternative that does not require Fiji to reject cooperation entirely.

PART IV: PROPOSED AMENDMENTS TO THE TREATY — ARTICLE BY ARTICLE

The following amendments are proposed. Proposed new text is shown in [square brackets]. Reasons are given after each.

PREAMBLE

Proposed addition: Insert after the paragraph beginning "REAFFIRMING the commitment of the Parties as democratic states":

[RECOGNISING that the commitment to act under Article 6 is a commitment to war, and that such a commitment requires the informed consent of the peoples of the Parties through their parliamentary processes and, in the case of Fiji, consultation with the Great Council of Chiefs consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples;]

Reason: The Treaty's preamble acknowledges democracy but does not acknowledge that war requires democratic consent. This addition makes explicit what is already implied.

ARTICLE 1: PURPOSE

Proposed amendment:

The purpose of this Treaty is to recognise and affirm the commitment between the Parties to protect their sovereignty, secure their mutual defence and security interests and contribute to the stability and security of the Pacific [, consistent with the democratic processes of each Party, the rights of indigenous peoples under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the principles of the Charter of the United Nations].

Reason: This amendment makes clear that the Treaty's purposes are to be pursued consistently with democratic processes and indigenous rights, not in place of them.

ARTICLE 2: DEMOCRATIC VALUES

Proposed addition: Insert after the existing text:

[Consistent with this commitment, any decision by a Party to act under Article 6 shall be made in accordance with its own constitutional and democratic processes, including, where required, parliamentary approval and, in the case of Fiji, consultation with the Great Council of Chiefs consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.]

Reason: Article 2 declares a commitment to democracy but does not apply it to the Treaty's most consequential provision. This addition ensures that the Treaty's democratic values are operationalised.

ARTICLE 3: PEACEFUL SETTLEMENT OF DISPUTES

Proposed addition: Insert at the end:

[The Parties shall also endeavour to prevent the emergence of disputes by engaging in regular consultation through the Pacific Islands Forum and other regional mechanisms.]

Reason: Prevention is better than settlement. This addition strengthens the Treaty's commitment to the Pacific Way.

ARTICLE 4: COOPERATION

Proposed addition: Insert at the end:

[Such cooperation shall be consistent with the comprehensive concept of security set out in the Boe Declaration on Regional Security, including human

security, environmental security, economic security, cyber security and climate security.][32]

Reason: The Treaty narrows security to military matters. The Boe Declaration, which Fiji has endorsed, defines security comprehensively. This addition aligns the Treaty with Fiji's existing commitments.

ARTICLE 5: CONSULTATION

Proposed amendment:

In the event of a security-related development that threatens the sovereignty, peace or stability of a Party, the Parties shall consult at the request of any Party and consider whether any measures should be taken in relation to the threat. [Such consultation shall, where practicable, include the Pacific Islands Forum and shall take into account the views of other Pacific states. In the case of Fiji, consultation shall also include the Great Council of Chiefs before any decision to act under Article 6 is made.]

Reason: Security developments in the Pacific affect all Pacific states. Consultation should be regional, not merely bilateral. In Fiji, it must also be consistent with the role of the GCC and UNDRIP.

ARTICLE 6: MUTUAL DEFENCE

Proposed amendments:

Each Party recognises that an armed attack on any of the Parties within the Pacific would be dangerous to each other's peace and security as well as the security of the Pacific, and declares that it would act to meet the common danger, in accordance with its domestic processes. [, including, in the case of Fiji, the requirement of prior approval by the Parliament of Fiji, consultation with the Great Council of Chiefs, and, where practicable, consultation with and consensus of the Pacific Islands Forum.]

[For the avoidance of doubt, nothing in this Article shall require Fiji to act in response to an armed attack arising from a conflict to which Fiji is not a party, including a conflict arising from any other alliance or security arrangement to which Australia is a party, including AUKUS and ANZUS.]

[For the avoidance of doubt, "within the Pacific" shall be defined consistently with the membership of the Pacific Islands Forum and shall exclude the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula.]

Reasons:

· The first amendment ensures that Fiji's constitutional and democratic processes are respected. The phrase "in accordance with its domestic processes" already exists in the text; the amendment makes explicit what those processes require in Fiji's case, including consultation with the GCC.

· The second amendment prevents Fiji from being drawn into conflicts arising from Australia's other alliance commitments, including those flagged by former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating. This is a defensive-only interpretation of Article 6.
· The third amendment defines the geographic scope of the Treaty to exclude areas of great-power tension that are not part of the Pacific Islands region.

A note on the geographic limitation. The geographic limitation proposed here does not limit the application of the Charter or of international law. Fiji's obligations under the Charter apply everywhere, without exception. What the amendment limits is the scope of a bilateral treaty obligation to go to war. Those are different things. Fiji may affirm that international law governs every theatre while declining to accept a treaty obligation to fight in every theatre. Indeed, the President's insistence that Fiji "asks the same of every party in every theatre" is a reason to require the same standard of Australia — including peaceful settlement of disputes, which Article 11 currently denies.

ARTICLE 7: VISITING FORCES

Proposed addition: Insert at the end:

[Any such agreement or arrangement shall: (a) preserve the criminal jurisdiction of Fijian courts over offences committed on Fijian territory; (b) require prior approval by the Parliament of Fiji of any permanent or long-term presence; (c) require environmental and social impact assessment; (d) preserve Fiji's right to restrict, suspend or terminate any presence at any time; and (e) be published in full before entry into force.]

Reason: Article 7 contemplates foreign military personnel on Fijian soil but does not specify safeguards. These amendments ensure that Fijian law, Fijian parliamentary oversight, and Fijian environmental and social protections apply.

ARTICLE 8: GOVERNANCE

Proposed addition: Insert at the end:

[Such mechanisms shall include a joint parliamentary committee of the Parties, with representatives from both Parliaments, to oversee implementation of this Treaty and to review any proposed action under Article 6.]

Reason: Parliamentary oversight is a democratic safeguard. A joint committee ensures that both Parties' legislatures are engaged.

ARTICLE 10: PERFORMANCE OF OBLIGATIONS

Proposed amendment:

(1) No Party shall act in a manner that would undermine its ability to meet any of its obligations pursuant to this Treaty [, provided that nothing in this Article shall prevent a Party from acting consistently with its obligations under the

Charter of the United Nations, its own constitution, the rights of indigenous peoples under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, or the comprehensive concept of security set out in the Boe Declaration on Regional Security].

Reason: Article 10(1) is a general constraint on Fiji's sovereignty. This amendment preserves Fiji's existing legal obligations and ensures that the Treaty does not override them.

ARTICLE 11: DISPUTES BETWEEN THE PARTIES

Proposed amendment:

(1) Any dispute arising under this Treaty with respect to its interpretation, application or implementation shall be settled by consultation and negotiations in good faith between the Parties [, and may, where the Parties agree, be referred to mediation, conciliation, or binding international arbitration].

Reason: The current text denies Fiji recourse to any independent adjudication. This amendment preserves the Pacific Way preference for consultation while permitting independent resolution where the Parties agree. The President of Fiji identified "peaceful settlement of disputes" as one of the three Charter principles that protect small states. Article 11 as drafted removes that protection by denying Fiji access to any court or tribunal. The amendment restores it.[4]

ARTICLE 12: SIGNATURE, RATIFICATION AND ACCESSION

Proposed amendment:

(3) The Parties may, by unanimous consent, invite any other Pacific State in a position to further the purposes and principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the Pacific to accede to this Treaty by depositing an instrument of accession. [Such invitation shall be made in consultation with the Pacific Islands Forum.]

(4) Accession by a Pacific State is subject to that accession being accepted by the existing Parties. [Such acceptance shall not be unreasonably withheld.]

Reason: The current provisions give Australia a veto over which Pacific states may join. This amendment requires consultation with the Forum and prevents unreasonable refusal.

ARTICLE 13: THE DEPOSITARY

Proposed amendment:

The Government of Australia shall serve as the Depositary for this Treaty [, or such other neutral body as the Parties may agree, including the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat].

Reason: A neutral depositary is more consistent with the Treaty's Pacific character and with the principle of sovereign equality.

ARTICLE 15: DURATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Proposed amendments:

(1) This Treaty shall remain in force [for an initial period of five years, and shall thereafter be subject to renewal by mutual agreement of the Parties].

(2) Any Party will cease to be a Party [six months] after the date of its written notice of withdrawal to the Depositary.

Reasons: A five-year sunset clause ensures periodic democratic reconsideration. A six-month withdrawal period is more consistent with sovereign equality than a one-year period.

ARTICLE 16: AMENDMENT

Proposed amendment:

After this Treaty has been in force for [three years], the Parties may, if any of them so requests, consult together for the purpose of reviewing this Treaty…

Reason: A three-year review is more consistent with democratic accountability than a ten-year review.

NEW ARTICLE: NON-ALIGNMENT

Proposed new article:

[ARTICLE 17: NON-ALIGNMENT

(1) The Parties recognise and respect Fiji's established foreign policy of non-alignment and its commitment to peaceful coexistence with all nations.

(2) Consistent with the principles of sovereign equality and non-intervention in the Charter of the United Nations, nothing in this Treaty shall require either Party to join a military alliance, host a foreign military base, or align against any state.

(3) Australia shall not dictate to Fiji what it can and cannot do within its own borders, including its foreign and security relationships.

(4) Fiji may partner with multiple vendors, investors and states on security and defence matters. Australia shall not pressure Fiji to exclude any third country.]

Reason: Fiji's non-aligned foreign policy is a cornerstone of its sovereignty. This article ensures that the Treaty does not undermine it. This Article does not invent a new policy for Fiji. It writes into the Treaty what Fiji's Head of State has

already declared at the United Nations: "When the world asks small states to choose between competing power blocs, Fiji chooses principles and we choose the Charter."[4]

NEW ARTICLE: CONSULTATION WITH THE GREAT COUNCIL OF CHIEFS AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Proposed new article:

[ARTICLE 18: CONSULTATION WITH THE GREAT COUNCIL OF CHIEFS AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

(1) The Parties recognise that more than 60% of Fiji's population are indigenous iTaukei, for whom the Great Council of Chiefs is at the apex of their social system.

(2) Before Fiji takes any decision to act under Article 6, the Government of Fiji shall formally consult the Great Council of Chiefs and provide it with all relevant information.

(3) This Article is consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which requires the involvement of the key institutions of indigenous peoples in all important matters affecting them.

(4) Nothing in this Treaty shall be interpreted as diminishing the role of the Great Council of Chiefs or the rights of indigenous peoples under Fiji's Constitution and international law.]

Reason: A commitment to war is an important matter affecting the indigenous people of Fiji. The GCC is the key institution at the apex of iTaukei society. UNDRIP requires its involvement. This Article makes that requirement explicit in the Treaty.

PART V: PROPOSED SAFEGUARDS — PROCEDURAL

Fiji should seek the following procedural safeguards.

1. Parliamentary consensus requirement for Article 6 action. Any decision to act under Article 6 requires a two-thirds majority in Parliament, or cross-party consensus in the relevant committee, or a national referendum.
2. Great Council of Chiefs consultation requirement. Before any decision to act under Article 6, the Government of Fiji must formally consult the Great Council of Chiefs. More than 60% of Fiji's population are indigenous iTaukei, for whom the GCC is at the apex of their social system. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) requires the involvement of the key institutions of indigenous peoples in all important matters affecting them. A decision to go to war is such a matter. The GCC must therefore be formally consulted, and its views must be placed before Parliament before any vote.
3. Pacific Islands Forum consensus requirement. Any Article 6 action must first be considered by the Forum. Fiji will not act without Forum consensus,

consistent with the Biketawa Declaration,[33] the Boe Declaration, and the Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration. This requirement reflects the President's statement that peacekeeping missions must be "properly mandated, properly financed and properly supported."[4] A commitment to war is the most serious mandate of all. It must be properly mandated.

4. UN Security Council authorization requirement. Any Article 6 action requires prior authorization by the UN Security Council, or a determination that the action is consistent with Article 51 of the UN Charter.

5. Constitutional review by the Supreme Court. Before ratification, Fiji should refer the Treaty to the Supreme Court for a determination on whether ratification requires constitutional amendment, and whether the Treaty complies with the Bill of Rights and the protection of iTaukei land and customary rights.

6. Ratification tied to implementing legislation. Fiji should not ratify until Parliament has passed implementing legislation, with full debate, committee scrutiny and public consultation.

7. National referendum on war commitments. Any treaty obligation that commits Fiji to war should require a national referendum before it takes effect.

8. Joint parliamentary oversight committee. A permanent joint parliamentary committee should oversee treaty implementation, with power to summon ministers, review intelligence, and approve or reject any proposed action under Article 6.

9. Parliamentary delegation to the American territories and Freely Associated States. Fiji should send a parliamentary delegation to Guam, American Samoa and the Northern Mariana Islands, and to the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands and Palau. The delegation should assess how their responsibilities as US citizens, and, for Micronesians, their belonging to the Compact of Free Association with the United States, have affected local communities. Their youth have joined US military forces and have died in America's foreign wars. The delegation should examine how local communities have adjusted to this, and what measures their governments have put in place to safeguard the interests of families and communities during times of great emotional stress. In the arrivals concourse at Pohnpei Airport in the Federated States of Micronesia, portraits of citizens killed while serving in the military are displayed. Why is there a need for this? Should Fiji be doing the same, posting pictures of all its citizens killed while defending Australian interests at the arrivals hall at Nadi International Airport, so that we do not forget their sacrifice? These are the issues we need to think through before committing ourselves to the treaty.

PART VI: PROPOSED SAFEGUARDS — SUBSTANTIVE

Fiji should also seek the following substantive safeguards.

1. Sunset clause. Instead of an indefinite treaty, Fiji should seek a five-year sunset clause, with renewal requiring fresh parliamentary approval.

2. Three-year mandatory review. Instead of Article 16's ten-year review, Fiji should seek a three-year review, with affirmative parliamentary approval required to continue.

3. Defensive-only commitment. Article 6 should apply only if Fiji itself is attacked, not if Australia is attacked.
4. Geographic limitation. "Within the Pacific" should be defined to exclude the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, the Korean Peninsula, and any area outside the Pacific Islands region as defined by the Pacific Islands Forum.
5. Third-party alliance exclusion. Article 6 should expressly exclude any conflict arising from Australia's other alliance commitments, including AUKUS and ANZUS. As former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating has warned, AUKUS risks locking Australia into a potential US-China war. Fiji must not be drawn into that war.
6. Opt-out clause. Fiji should retain the right to opt out of any specific conflict by parliamentary resolution, without terminating the entire treaty.
7. Non-Alignment Article. The Treaty should include an article recognising Fiji's non-aligned foreign policy and providing that nothing in the Treaty requires either Party to join a military alliance, host a foreign military base, or align against any state.
8. Great Council of Chiefs safeguard. The Treaty should include an article requiring formal consultation with the Great Council of Chiefs before any decision to act under Article 6. This is required by the role of the GCC at the apex of iTaukei society and by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which requires the involvement of key institutions of indigenous peoples in all important matters affecting them.
9. Neutral Depositary. The Depositary should be the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat or another neutral body, not the Government of Australia.
10. Removal of accession veto. Australia's veto over which Pacific states may join, under Article 12(3) and 12(4), should be removed.
11. Visiting forces safeguards. Any visiting forces agreement under Article 7 should preserve the criminal jurisdiction of Fijian courts, require prior parliamentary approval of any permanent or long-term presence, require environmental and social impact assessment, preserve Fiji's right to restrict, suspend or terminate any presence at any time, and be published in full before entry into force.
12. Independent adjudication. Article 11 should be amended to permit reference of disputes to the International Court of Justice or to binding international arbitration where the Parties agree.
13. Reciprocity and mobility. Fiji should seek reciprocal visa and mobility arrangements as part of the Treaty package. If Australia requires Fiji to accept mutual defence obligations, it should extend to Fijian citizens the same visa access it extends to Malaysians and Britons. A Vuvale relationship cannot be one-sided.
14. Reliability review. Before ratification, Parliament should require the Government to produce an assessment of Australia's capacity and willingness to honour its commitments under the Treaty, including Australia's dependence on the United States, the political risks facing the current Australian government, and the implications for Fiji if Australia's commitments are not honoured. The reliability assessment must explain why Australia requires a binding mutual defence commitment from Fiji when its own security agreement with Ukraine — a nation at war — is legally non-binding and contains no mutual defence obligations.
15. Partnership integrity review. Before ratification, Parliament should require

the Government to produce an assessment of whether the Vuvale Union meets the criteria of a genuine partnership of equals, including whether Fiji retains effective sovereignty over defence, foreign affairs, and constitutional matters, and whether the treaty contains mechanisms for independent adjudication and exit. The integrity review must analyse the implications of Australia's use of non-binding security agreements with other partners while pursuing a legally binding mutual defence treaty with Fiji.

16. Non-binding framework option. Fiji should seek to restructure the Treaty as a legally non-binding security cooperation framework, consistent with the Australia–Ukraine Bilateral Security Agreement (2026) and the 28 other bilateral security arrangements Ukraine has concluded, all of which are legally non-binding and contain no mutual defence obligations. This would align Fiji with Australia's own most recent treaty practice, preserve Fiji's sovereignty and non-aligned foreign policy, and eliminate the structural asymmetry created by Articles 11, 12, 13, and 15.

17. Consistency with Fiji's declared foreign policy. Before ratification, Parliament should require the Government to certify whether the Treaty is consistent with the foreign policy declared by the President of Fiji at the United Nations General Assembly on 24 September 2026 — in particular, the commitments to choose principles over power blocs, to uphold sovereign equality, territorial integrity and peaceful settlement of disputes, and to ensure that the Pacific "must not become a theatre in which others settle their rivalries."

18. Study of military-service communities and memorialisation. The parliamentary delegation proposed in Part V should also examine the measures taken by governments in the American territories and Freely Associated States to safeguard families and communities during times of great emotional stress. It should consider why Pohnpei Airport displays portraits of citizens killed while serving in the military. It should ask whether Fiji should do the same at Nadi International Airport for all Fijian citizens killed while defending Australian interests, so that their sacrifice is not forgotten. These are matters that should be thought through before Fiji commits itself to the treaty.

PART VII: THE FRAMING — DEMOCRATIC RESPONSIBILITY

Fiji must frame these safeguards as democratic responsibility.

The language should be:

"Fiji is a democracy. Our Constitution requires due process. Our people must understand what this Treaty means for their sons and daughters. Our Parliament must scrutinise it. Our Great Council of Chiefs must be consulted, consistent with UNDRIP. Our Pacific neighbours must be consulted. This is not delay — this is democracy. This is the Pacific Way."

The strongest framing available to Fiji is not opposition to Australia. It is fidelity to Fiji's own declared principles. As the President of Fiji told the United Nations: "Fiji chooses principles and we choose the Charter. We choose international law. We choose dialogue over coercion, human dignity over domination and cooperation over confrontation."[4]

PART VIII: CONCLUSION — A CALL TO THE COMMITTEE

This submission is fundamentally pro-democracy and pro-Australia-Fiji relationship. It is not anti-Australian. It is a call to action, urging both nations to deepen their partnership by renewing their commitment to the shared values of consultative democracy, mutual respect, and open dialogue.

On 24 September 2026, the President of Fiji told the United Nations General Assembly that Fiji "will not be drawn into choosing between competing global power blocs," that "international law is not optional and peace cannot be secured by power alone," and that "our ocean must not become a theatre in which others settle their rivalries."[4] This submission asks the Committee to ensure that the Treaty now before it is consistent with those words.

Fiji stands at a crossroads. It is being asked to commit its sons and daughters to war, to constrain its sovereignty, to align itself with one great power in a world of superpower rivalry, and to do so without public education and without the informed consent of its people.

This submission does not say "reject the Treaty." It says: make it worthy of Fiji.

We call on the Committee and the Government of Fiji to:

1. Defer ratification until the safeguards in this submission have been secured.
2. Conduct public hearings in all divisions, including Nadi, Ba, Lautoka, Suva, Nausori and the maritime regions.
3. Release information material in simple English, with translations into iTaukei and Hindi, and distribute it widely so all Fijians can understand what the Treaty means.
4. Require parliamentary, Great Council of Chiefs and Pacific Islands Forum consensus before any commitment to act under Article 6. The GCC must be consulted because more than 60% of Fiji's population are indigenous iTaukei, for whom the GCC is at the apex of their social system, and because UNDRIP requires the involvement of key institutions of indigenous peoples in all important matters affecting them.
5. Require a national referendum before any treaty obligation committing Fiji to war takes effect.
6. Seek a Supreme Court opinion on the constitutional implications of the Treaty.
7. Seek a five-year sunset clause and three-year mandatory review.
8. Seek formal reservations and declarations excluding conflicts arising from third-party alliances, including AUKUS and ANZUS, and excluding the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula from the Treaty's geographic scope.
9. Seek a Non-Alignment Article consistent with Fiji's established foreign policy.
10. Seek a neutral Depositary and the removal of Australia's accession veto.
11. Establish a joint parliamentary oversight committee with power to approve or reject any proposed action under Article 6.
12. Reaffirm the Boe Declaration's comprehensive concept of security, including

climate, human, environmental, economic and cyber security, rather than substituting a military pact for a security framework.
13. Seek reciprocal visa and mobility arrangements, so that a defence partnership is matched by equal treatment for Fijian citizens.
14. Require a reliability assessment of Australia's capacity and willingness to honour its Treaty commitments before ratification, including an explanation of why Australia requires a binding mutual defence commitment from Fiji when its own security agreement with Ukraine — a nation at war — is legally non-binding.
15. Require a partnership integrity assessment before ratification, drawing on comparative legal analysis of treaties framed as "partnerships" that have resulted in structural subordination.
16. Seek a non-binding security framework on the Australia–Ukraine model, with a ten-year duration and no mutual defence obligations, consistent with Australia's own treaty practice with Ukraine. This would align Fiji with Australia's most recent treaty practice, preserve Fiji's sovereignty and non-aligned foreign policy, and eliminate the structural asymmetry that places Fiji in a subordinate legal position.
17. Require a statement of consistency with the President's UNGA address of 24 September 2026, addressing specifically whether the Treaty's mutual defence commitment, indefinite duration, depositary arrangements, accession veto, and exclusion of independent adjudication are consistent with Fiji's declared commitments to non-alignment, sovereign equality, and peaceful settlement of disputes.
18. Authorise a parliamentary delegation from Fiji to visit the American territories—Guam, American Samoa and the Northern Mariana Islands—and the Micronesian states covered by the Compact of Free Association with the United States (the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands and Palau). The delegation should assess how their responsibilities as US citizens, and, for Micronesians, their belonging to the Compact of Free Association with the US, have affected local communities. Their youth have joined US military forces and have died in America's foreign wars. The delegation should examine how local communities have adjusted to this, and what measures their governments have put in place to safeguard the interests of families and communities during times of great emotional stress. In the arrivals concourse at Pohnpei Airport in the Federated States of Micronesia, portraits of citizens killed while serving in the military are displayed. Why is there a need for this? Should Fiji be doing the same, posting pictures of all its citizens killed while defending Australian interests at the arrivals hall at Nadi International Airport, so that we do not forget their sacrifice? These are the issues we need to think through before committing ourselves to the treaty.
19. Include the Great Council of Chiefs in the formal consultation process before any Fiji decision to go to war, consistent with its role at the apex of iTaukei society and with UNDRIP.

Fiji is a sovereign state. Fiji is a democracy. Fiji has the right to make these demands.

Let Fiji be patient. Let Fiji be democratic. Let Fiji be Pacific.

END OF SUBMISSION

FOOTNOTES

[1] Rabuka Government, "Fiji–Australia Vuvale Union (Vuvale Union) and Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty) — Written Analysis" (2026). All subsequent references to "the Government's Analysis" or "the Government's Written Analysis" are to this document.

[2] Boe Declaration on Regional Security, Pacific Islands Forum (2018).

[3] Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration, Pacific Islands Forum (2025).

[4] Address by the President of Fiji, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, to the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 24 September 2026.

[5] First Fleet, 1788. The eleven ships that established the first European colony in New South Wales.

[6] Government's Written Analysis, §9.3.

[7] Australia–Ukraine Bilateral Security Agreement (2026). Signed 23 September 2026. Legally non-binding, ten-year duration, no mutual defence obligations. President Zelensky described it as "the strongest document between our countries."

[8] Government's Written Analysis, §9.1.

[9] Government's Written Analysis, §9.3.

[10] Government's Written Analysis, §2.1(a), §9.2.

[11] East Asia Forum, "The Ocean of Peace Declaration: Pacific-led or co-opted?" (2025).

[12] Pacific Conference of Churches, statement by General Secretary Reverend James Bhagwan (2025).

[13] Fiji Times, "Equality in law, inequality in practice" (2026).

[14] ANZUS Treaty (1951). AUKUS (2021).

[15] Paul Keating, former Prime Minister of Australia, public statement on AUKUS (2026).

[16] Government's Written Analysis, §1.2.

[17] Five Power Defence Arrangements (1971). Jaoji Savou, Suva lawyer, commentary on Australia's visa regime (2026).

[18] Australian Department of Home Affairs, Subclass 600 visa requirements; Genuine Temporary Entrant requirement.

[19] Savou, ibid.

[20] Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, speech launching Australia's UN Security Council bid, New York (2026).

[21] Fiji Times, ibid.

[22] Bob Carr, former Australian Foreign Minister, commentary on the US snub of Prime Minister Albanese (2026).

[23] Australian political polling data (2026).

[24] Treaty of Union, 1707, between the Kingdom of Scotland and the Kingdom of England. The treaty was ratified by the Acts of Union passed by the Scottish Parliament and the English Parliament. Its lawfulness and voluntary character are now contested. See generally T.M. Devine, Scotland's Empire and the Shaping of the Americas (2003); Christopher A. Whatley, The Scots and the Union (2006).

[25] JPTi (Justice pour Tous Internationale) and Liberation Scotland, submission to the United Nations, Geneva (2025). The submission argues that the 1707 Treaty of Union was never lawfully implemented, that Scotland was annexed into England's constitutional framework rather than joining as an equal partner, and that Scotland's sovereignty was extinguished while its institutions were dissolved or subordinated. See also Robert Black KC, Geneva speech (2025), part 3, describing the Union as a "takeover" rather than a voluntary partnership.

[26] Panel of international law experts, Geneva (2025). The panel concluded that Scotland meets the criteria for a Non-Self-Governing Territory under UN General Assembly Resolution 1541 (XV) (1960), which sets out the criteria for determining whether a territory is non-self-governing. The criteria include: (a) the territory is geographically separate and distinct ethnically and/or culturally from the administering country; (b) the territory is arbitrarily placed in a subordinate position; and (c) the territory has not attained a full measure of self-government. The panel's finding is contested by the UK government but has not been formally adjudicated by the UN.

[27] Sara Salyers, Liberation Scotland, Geneva speech (2025); Robert Black KC, Geneva speech (2025), part 3. Salyers argues that the absence of a genuine voluntary foundation is determinative: "We are not a voluntary partnership, a 'takeover' is what it was." She advocates for Scotland to seek recognition as a Non-Self-Governing Territory (NSGT), which would allow it to hold a democratic independence vote without permission from the administering power (the UK). She credits the Liberation movement with proving that Scotland can only achieve NSGT status at the UN as part of a broader independence strategy.

[28] Salyers, ibid. Salyers argues: "As no United Crown was ever created in 1707, no British Crown exists, so the Crown of Scotland remains as a legal and constitutional reality." She notes that uniquely in Scotland's constitution, the Crown is not the monarch; the sovereign authority is the "Community of the Realm" (the people). The Claim of Right 1689 protects the Scottish Crown and requires that the Scottish Coronation remain in force. In Scotland, government is limited by the "rights of the people." In England, by contrast, Parliament has authority to make or unmake any law it chooses.

[29] Hansard, House of Commons (2025). For the first time in over 300 years, Hansard has recorded that Scotland did not join a "territorial union" in 1707, but merely an economic and political one. This record is significant because it undermines the traditional narrative of a voluntary political partnership and supports the argument that Scotland's constitutional status remains distinct.

[30] Black KC, Geneva speech (2025), part 3. Black has noted that the British State has a recorded history of violating approximately 200 treaties over centuries, which justifies the historical description "Perfidious Albion" (breach of faith, treachery). This pattern, he argues, demonstrates that treaty language cannot be relied upon without enforceable safeguards.

[31] Charter of the United Nations, Article 51.

[32] Boe Declaration on Regional Security (2018).

[33] Biketawa Declaration, Pacific Islands Forum (2000).

[34] United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007. UNDRIP requires, among other things, that states consult and cooperate in good faith with indigenous peoples through their own representative institutions before adopting measures that may affect them, and that indigenous peoples participate in decision-making in matters affecting their rights.

[35] Compact of Free Association between the United States and the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands and Palau. Under the Compact, citizens of the Freely Associated States may serve in the US armed forces, and many have died in America's foreign wars.

[36] Pohnpei Airport, Federated States of Micronesia, arrivals concourse display of portraits of citizens killed while serving in the military; proposal for a similar display at Nadi International Airport, Fiji.

END OF SUBMISSION

Written Submissions Received From Respective Organisations

Provision Global Solutions

PROVISION GLOBAL SOLUTIONS

STRENGTHENING FIJI'S SOVEREIGN CAPABILITY THROUGH STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Submission to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

Regarding the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and
Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty)

Submitted by Provision Global Solutions (PGS)

A Fijian-led sovereign capability development organisation
with strategic capability support from UKCIS

9 September 2026

CORE PROPOSITION

The enduring measure of successful strategic partnership should include the sovereign capability Fiji develops, owns and sustains as a consequence of that partnership.

Fijian-led. Partnership-enabled. Sovereign by design.

1. Executive Summary

Provision Global Solutions (PGS) respectfully submits these observations for the consideration of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence in its review of the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty).

PGS recognises the strategic importance of Fiji's established regional and international partnerships. The Vuvale Union seeks to enhance collective security, stability and prosperity while protecting and promoting sovereignty and democracy. The Veitacini Treaty further formalises cooperation intended to develop the Parties' individual and collective capacity to protect sovereignty, mutual defence and Pacific stability.

PGS does not seek through this submission to advocate for a commercial appointment or to displace Fiji's existing partners. Our submission addresses a narrower implementation question: how can deeper strategic partnership translate into stronger, enduring Fijian national capability?

PGS respectfully proposes a Sovereign Capability Test:

"What additional capability will Fiji's people, institutions and systems be able to own, operate, govern and sustain as a consequence of this programme?"

PGS recommends that treaty implementation give particular attention to:

- Fijian ownership, leadership and institutional accountability;
- structured skills, knowledge and instructor transfer;
- counter-narcotics and transnational organised crime capability;
- border security, intelligence coordination and information sharing;
- cybersecurity, secure communications and critical-infrastructure resilience;
- institutional integrity, evidential assurance and anti-corruption safeguards;
- interoperability with trusted partners without unnecessary long-term dependency; and
- measurable outcomes that demonstrate growth in Fiji's own sovereign capability.

2. About Provision Global Solutions

PGS is a Fijian-led organisation established to bring internationally developed Fijian experience back into the service of Fiji's long-term security, resilience and capability development. Its team draws on professional experience across counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism, secure communications, information technology, cybersecurity, operational capability development, training and leadership.

PGS works with UKCIS and other appropriately selected international specialists where additional expertise is required. The intended model is Fijian lead, international support, knowledge transfer and enduring local ownership. This submission is a policy contribution and is separate from any commercial proposition.

3. Strategic Assessment of the Agreements

3.1 Sovereignty and partnership are mutually reinforcing

PGS considers sovereignty and strategic partnership to be mutually reinforcing. A state with strong national institutions, professional personnel, resilient infrastructure, trusted information systems and effective border and security capabilities is better positioned to exercise sovereign decision-making and to engage international partners from a position of confidence and national capacity.

This principle is consistent with the agreements. The Vuvale Union recognises sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and democratic systems, while providing for a progressively deepened partnership. The Veitacini Treaty places individual capacity alongside collective capacity in its cooperation framework.

3.2 Human capability and professional development

The Government's Written Analysis identifies priorities including defence recruitment and skills development, situational awareness, air and maritime capability, infrastructure, cybersecurity, counter-terrorism and countering transnational organised crime. It also records interest in structured training, professional development and skills transfer.

PGS therefore recommends that major capability programmes incorporate a deliberate pathway from external assistance to Fijian competence: selection and recruitment, professional development, specialist training, leadership development, validation, instructor development and continuing professional assurance.

3.3 Counter-narcotics and transnational organised crime

The Written Analysis identifies tackling transnational crime, drugs and the associated HIV crisis as a transformative priority, including stronger law-enforcement cooperation and enhanced maritime capability. It also identifies stronger intelligence sharing against organised crime, illegal fishing, drug trafficking, people smuggling and trafficking, and other emerging threats.

PGS submits that this supports a whole-of-system approach to counter-narcotics: professionally selected and trained personnel, intelligence-led coordination, secure information sharing, maritime and border awareness, evidential integrity, institutional safeguards and effective inter-agency cooperation under Fijian authority.

3.4 Border security and migration management

The Written Analysis identifies border-security and migration-management reform, increased sharing of practice, and modernisation of border-management systems through technology, legislative and systems reform, and skills development. PGS recommends that border modernisation be treated as an integrated capability rather than an IT acquisition alone.

PEOPLE + POLICY + PROCESS + TECHNOLOGY + INFORMATION + TRAINING + GOVERNANCE

4. Priority Sovereign Capability Areas

4.1 Cybersecurity, critical infrastructure and secure communications

The Vuvale Union places specific emphasis on critical infrastructure, technology and cyberspace, including telecommunications, digital infrastructure, ports, aviation, energy, artificial intelligence and emerging technologies. The Written Analysis also highlights risks to undersea cables, digital and communications systems and the need for secure systems across defence, border control and enforcement.

PGS recommends a cross-government principle of Secure Digital Infrastructure and Information Resilience, covering secure communications, cyber resilience, information assurance, resilient connectivity, continuity of operations, interoperability and protection of sensitive Government information.

4.2 Institutional integrity and evidential assurance

Capability is weakened where institutional integrity, evidence handling, access control, auditability or professional standards are weak. PGS therefore recommends that sensitive national-security and law-enforcement programmes incorporate integrity by design: appropriate vetting, role-based access, auditable procedures, evidence-chain assurance, conflict-of-interest controls, professional accountability and independent assurance where appropriate.

4.3 International technology and third-party capability

Article 4 of the Vuvale Union gives particular attention to engagement with third parties in critical infrastructure, technology and security sectors. PGS recognises the importance of specialist international technology and expertise, but submits that sensitive capability acquisition should be assessed against clear national-interest criteria.

- sovereign Government control and lawful authority;
- security of data, networks and sensitive information;
- interoperability with Fiji's existing systems and trusted partners;
- open standards and avoidance of unnecessary vendor lock-in;
- whole-life affordability, maintenance and sustainment;
- Fijian workforce development and knowledge transfer; and
- clear governance, auditability and accountability.

4.4 National resilience

The treaty architecture adopts a broad conception of security encompassing economic resilience, climate security, human development and national stability. The Written Analysis also identifies health, digital transformation, energy, aviation, ports and remote-island infrastructure. PGS therefore considers national resilience to be complementary to conventional security capability.

Resilient communications, emergency logistics, continuity arrangements and capable institutions can provide dual-use national value across security, humanitarian response and disaster recovery.

5. Recommendations to the Standing Committee

1. Adopt a Sovereign Capability Test

For significant treaty-enabled programmes, consider what additional capability Fiji's people, institutions and systems will be able to own, operate, govern and sustain at programme completion.

2. Make capability transfer an explicit implementation outcome

Where international partners provide specialist expertise, training or technology, incorporate appropriate Fijian skills transfer, instructor development, leadership development, maintenance competence and institutional knowledge retention.

3. Treat counter-narcotics, border security and intelligence coordination as integrated national capabilities

Avoid isolated technology or training interventions. Align people, policy, process, information, technology, governance and inter-agency coordination under appropriate Fijian authority.

4. Apply sovereignty and security principles to sensitive technology

Assess data control, cybersecurity, interoperability, vendor dependency, lifecycle support, auditability and local sustainment before committing to critical-infrastructure, border, communications or security technologies.

5. Build institutional integrity alongside operational capability

Incorporate appropriate vetting, access control, evidential assurance, audit, professional standards and anti-corruption safeguards into sensitive capability programmes.

6. Measure capability, not only expenditure or activity

Use implementation metrics that demonstrate qualified Fijian specialists and instructors, sustainable systems, institutional readiness, interoperability, resilience and reduced dependency in selected capability areas.

7. Use the Vuvale Work Plan to reinforce long-term Fijian ownership

As the Vuvale Bukmak develops and oversees the phased long-term Work Plan, include measurable sovereign-capability outcomes and periodic Government review of whether programmes are producing enduring national competence.

6. Suggested Implementation Principle

FIJIAN OWNERSHIP | INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIP | ENDURING NATIONAL CAPABILITY

International cooperation should enable Fiji to access expertise, technology, investment and trusted partnership while progressively strengthening the people, institutions and systems through which Fiji exercises sovereign responsibility.

7. Conclusion

PGS considers the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty) to represent a significant development in Fiji's evolving national and regional security architecture. The agreements create opportunities for deeper cooperation across security, defence, economic development, critical infrastructure, technology, cybersecurity, border management and national resilience.

PGS respectfully submits that implementation should place deliberate emphasis on measurable and enduring Fijian sovereign capability. For PGS, sovereignty does not mean strategic isolation. It means ensuring Fiji possesses the people, institutions, systems, professional standards and national competence required to determine and protect its interests while participating confidently in regional and international partnerships.

PGS therefore supports an implementation philosophy that is Fijian-led, partnership-enabled, capability-focused and sovereign by design.

Fijian-led. Partnership-enabled. Sovereign by design.

8. Declaration and Contact

This submission is provided as a policy contribution to the Standing Committee's consideration of the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty). It does not request a procurement decision, commercial appointment or endorsement of any particular supplier or technology.

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Strategic capability partner	UKCIS

Sources Considered

- Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union (signed at Suva, 6 July 2026).
- Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty) (signed at Suva, 6 July 2026).
- Written Analysis: Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty).
- Provision Global Solutions / UKCIS initial sovereign capability and capacity-building briefs considered in preparing this submission.

Note: Recommendations are framed for Parliamentary policy consideration. Any future programme design, funding, procurement, legal, security or implementation arrangements would remain subject to the authority, due diligence and applicable processes of the Government of the Republic of Fiji.

Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)

SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE DEVELOPMENT ALTERNATIVES WITH WOMEN FOR A NEW ERA (DAWN)

1. INTRODUCTION

Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) is a network of feminist researchers and activists from the global South, established in 1987, working towards economic, environmental, gender and development justice, sustainable livelihoods and democratic governance. Since its inception, DAWN has incorporated the Pacific issues of political selfdetermination, nuclear disarmament and demilitarisation, sustainable livelihoods and environmental justice in its feminist research, analysis and advocacy for development justice. In the last 10 years, working in partnership with the Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG), DAWN has focused its Pacific work on ocean protection, self-determination, human rights and nuclear justice.

DAWN welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence concerning the Ocean of Peace Alliance, known as the Veitacini Treaty, signed by the Governments of Fiji and Australia in Suva on 6 July 2026. DAWN recognises the importance of Fiji's relationship with Australia and the longstanding cooperation between the two countries in peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, disaster response and regional affairs. However, the Veitacini Treaty represents a significant new development in Fiji's security architecture and its implications for Fiji's sovereignty, security, foreign policy and regional commitments to both a nuclear free Pacific, and to the Pacific's collective vision of an Ocean of Peace, which Fiji has championed, require careful consideration.

The Treaty is intended to be an instrument that protects sovereignty, strengthens mutual security and contributes to stability in the Pacific. It also explicitly situates itself within the Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration and the Pacific Way which is premised on consensus decision making. These commitments should therefore be the principal bases against which the Treaty is assessed.

The name of the Treaty is significant. Choosing 'Veitacini' which means 'brothers and sisters', or 'siblings' (like the choice of 'Vuvale' or family for Australia's earlier agreement with Fiji, the Vuvale Union) denotes a kinship relationship and suggests closeness and mutual care between the partners. It is important to remember, however, that these are not equal partnerships - Australia is a developed country and a donor state, while Fiji is a developing country, dependent on Australian aid. As such, Fiji needs to be careful about being subordinated to Australia's interests.

DAWN's concern is not that Fiji should reject cooperation or collective approaches to security. Rather, Fiji should ensure that the concept of security embodied in the Veitacini Treaty is

Pacific-led, human-centred, reflective of Pacific values and consistent with the region's longstanding commitments to peace, a nuclear-free Pacific, self-determination and sovereignty.

2. The central question: What does an "Ocean of Peace" mean?

The Veitacini Treaty states that the Parties intend, through their commitment to collective defence, to preserve the region as an **Ocean of Peace**, while also recognising their responsibility as Pacific military nations to promote regional security and stability.

Article 1 states that the purpose of the Treaty is to protect sovereignty, secure mutual defence and security interests, and contribute to stability and security in the Pacific.

DAWN believes that these objectives require careful examination because peace and militarisation are not synonymous. The Pacific has a long history of external military intervention by colonial or imperialist power; of subjection under occupation to decades-long programmes of nuclear weapons testing; of having military bases established on their lands without free, prior and informed consent; and suffering long term environmental and intergenerational health impacts of exposure to radiation and toxic spills. The use (or more correctly abuse) of Pacific territories and the Pacific Ocean for the strategic interests of larger powers should make us wary of being drawn into security treaties or alliances which may not be in our interests.

Pacific peoples have consistently asserted that their security priorities extend beyond conventional military threats and include climate change mitigation, adaptation and justice, food and water security, environmental protection, health and livelihoods protection, economic sovereignty and the right of peoples to determine their own futures.

The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent and the Pacific Islands Forum's Ocean of Peace vision provided an opportunity for Fiji to articulate a distinctly Pacific understanding of security.

A key question for the Committee should therefore be:

> **Does the Veitacini Treaty contribute to realising the Pacific's Ocean of Peace (which Fiji championed), or does it seriously compromise the Pacific strategy and vision by imposing a conventional military conception of security?**

Mutual defence and sovereign decision-making

The most consequential provision of the Treaty is **Article 6 on Mutual Defence**.

Article 6 provides that an armed attack on either Party within the Pacific would be regarded as dangerous to the peace and security of the other Party and to the security of the Pacific, and that each Party would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its domestic processes.

The reference to domestic processes is important and should be fully clarified.

The Committee should establish precisely what these processes entail for Fiji. In particular:

- What constitutional and parliamentary processes would be triggered by an external armed attack involving Australia?
- What decisions would need to be taken before Fiji could deploy military personnel, equipment or other resources?
- Could Fiji be expected to provide logistical, intelligence, maritime, airspace or infrastructure support without deploying combat forces?
- What circumstances would constitute an "armed attack" for purposes of the Treaty?
- Who determines whether an event constitutes an armed attack?
- How would Fiji retain the right to determine whether participation in a military response is consistent with its national interests and foreign policy?

These questions are particularly important because the Treaty is open to accession by other Pacific states, potentially creating a wider collective security arrangement. Article 12 allows additional Pacific states to join with the unanimous consent of existing Parties.

Fiji should ensure that the Treaty does not evolve into a mechanism through which Pacific states become automatically incorporated into conflicts between larger military powers including nuclear armed powers.

Fiji should especially ensure that it is not obliged to come to the defence of Australia in the event of a conflict initiated by a US attack on a country it deems its enemy.

Visiting forces and Fiji's sovereignty

Article 7 of the Veitacini Treaty requires the Parties to develop and maintain bilateral and multilateral visiting-forces agreements and arrangements to facilitate activities undertaken under the Treaty. This provision deserves particular scrutiny.

Visiting-forces arrangements can have significant implications for the movement and operation of foreign military personnel, vessels and equipment. In the context of an increasingly militarised Pacific, Fiji must retain full control over what military activities take place within its territory, including its territorial waters, airspace and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

This is especially important as Australia is in a controversial trilateral security partnership with the United States and the United Kingdom, – the AUKUS pact - under which, it has now been publicly revealed, Australia has effectively granted full access and control to many of its ports

and bases through an agreed arrangement for the rotational stationing of US nuclear submarines and B52 Bombers that will most likely be nuclear armed.

The Committee should therefore seek assurances that:

1. No foreign military presence or activity will occur in Fiji without explicit Fijian authorisation;

2. Visiting-forces arrangements will be subject to appropriate parliamentary and public oversight and shall not include rotational stationing of military vessels, aircraft or troops;

3. Fiji will retain the right to refuse military activities that conflict with its national interests or Pacific commitments;

4. Visiting military forces will remain subject to Fijian law and applicable international law; and

5. The Treaty cannot be interpreted as providing automatic access to Fiji's ports, airfields, maritime infrastructure or other strategic facilities.

This is particularly important given the growing strategic significance of Pacific ports and telecommunications infrastructure - undersea cables, low orbit satellites and maritime surveillance - within the context of intensifying great-power competition centred in the Pacific Ocean.

3. The Treaty and Fiji's nuclear-free identity

Fiji's security policy cannot be separated from the Pacific's history of nuclear testing and the region's longstanding opposition to nuclearization.

DAWN is concerned that increasing military enmeshment with states deeply integrated into nuclear deterrence architectures could create risks for Fiji that extend beyond the immediate terms of the Veitacini Treaty.

The Treaty does not itself provide for nuclear weapons deployment. However, Fiji should seek explicit clarification regarding the operation or transit of nuclear-powered - potentially nuclear-armed - vessels and other types of carriers including B52 Bombers in Fiji's maritime region, particularly where these activities could affect marine ecosystems, fisheries, food security and public health.

Pacific peoples should not be expected to accept strategic ambiguity regarding nuclear risks.

The Ocean of Peace vision should therefore be understood as including a commitment to maintaining the Pacific as a region free from nuclear weapons and protected from the environmental and humanitarian consequences of nuclear militarisation. Such an understanding is in keeping with our obligations as a State Party to the historic South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty (SPNFZT), also known as the Rarotonga Treaty, which Fiji also

championed with other independent and selfgoverning Pacific Island states and, through the South Pacific Forum, brought into being.

4. Security must be broader than military security

The Veitacini Treaty should be implemented within Fiji's broader understanding of security.

Fiji and Australia have themselves recognised that Pacific security encompasses more than protection from military threats. Fiji's stated approach to the Vuvale framework has identified economic, human, environmental and digital security alongside traditional defence. Fiji has also identified climate change as the region's most serious, existential threat.

DAWN therefore urges the Committee to ensure that the implementation of the Veitacini Treaty does not result in military security receiving disproportionate resources and political attention at the expense of these other dimensions.

For Pacific peoples, security includes:

- protection from climate change and environmental destruction;
- food and water security;
- protection of livelihoods and fisheries;
- health and wellbeing;
- economic sovereignty;
- digital and communications security;
- protection of Indigenous and traditional knowledge;
- freedom from nuclear contamination; and
- the right of Pacific peoples to determine their own development and security priorities.

A genuinely Pacific Ocean of Peace must place these dimensions of security at its centre.

Finally, the Veitacini Treaty, its implications and risks, must be assessed and understood within the alarming present global context of rising big-power geopolitical tensions; the rally to increase military spending resulting in a renewed global arms race; the hyper-militarisation of the Ocean with nuclear-powered and armed submarines and unmanned underwater vehicles plying subsea waters; the US-initiated war with Iran, in which Australia is heavily implicated through its highly-controversial defence and security pact with the US and the UK (AUKUS), which is now being revealed to have robbed Australia of its sovereignty; and the alarming development and experimental use in the Iran War of high-tech, AI-driven warfare.

5. DAWN's Recommendations

DAWN respectfully recommends that the Standing Committee: **Require a clear definition of "Ocean of Peace".**

The Government should articulate how the Veitacini Treaty will operationalise the Pacific Islands Forum's Ocean of Peace vision and distinguish it from conventional military alliance structures.

Clarify Fiji's mutual-defence obligations.
The Government should provide Parliament with a detailed explanation of the domestic processes referred to in Article 6, including the role of Cabinet, Parliament and the Fiji Military Forces, in accordance with which Fiji will independently assess and determine how to respond to meet a common danger.

Guarantee Fiji's sovereign decision-making.
Implementation of the Treaty must not create an automatic obligation for Fiji to participate in military operations, conflicts or strategic actions that are contrary to Fiji's national interests, constitutional processes or foreign policy of non-alignment.

Ensure parliamentary oversight of visiting-forces arrangements.
Any arrangements developed under Article 7 should be transparent and subject to appropriate parliamentary scrutiny.

Establish safeguards concerning foreign military access.
The Government should clarify the circumstances under which foreign military vessels, aircraft, personnel and equipment may enter or operate within Fiji. Based on recently exposed details on the operationalisation of the AUKUS pact - which has resulted in the US military takeover of Australian ports and bases - establishing safeguards against foreign military access is critical.

Protect Fiji's nuclear-free commitments and obligations under the SPNFZT. Fiji should seek explicit assurances and transparency regarding the presence of nuclear-powered and potentially nuclear-armed vessels and other nuclear-related military activities in Fiji's maritime region.

Require human rights and environmental impact assessments.

The implementation of the Treaty should be assessed for impacts on communities, marine ecosystems, fisheries, food security, cultural practices and the rights of future generations.

Maintain a Pacific-led approach to security

The Treaty should complement—not displace— Pacific Islands Forum Declarations, the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, the Boe Declaration and other Pacific-led regional mechanisms.

Establish regular parliamentary review

Given the Treaty is intended to remain in force indefinitely, Parliament should have a mechanism for periodic review of its implementation, particularly its impacts on Fiji's sovereignty, foreign policy and regional security.

8. Conclusion

The Veitacini Treaty presents Fiji with an important opportunity to define what Pacific security means in the twenty-first century.

The Treaty explicitly invokes sovereignty, peaceful settlement of disputes, the Pacific Way and the vision of an Ocean of Peace. These principles should not be merely rhetorical. They should govern the interpretation and implementation of the Treaty.

Fiji's security cannot be secured simply through greater military integration. A genuinely secure Fiji is one in which Fiji's people retain the ability to determine their own future; where the ocean remains a source of life and is not made a theatre for military competition or warring; where development is not subordinated to strategic interests; and where Pacific peoples are not drawn into conflicts between larger powers.

DAWN therefore calls on the Standing Committee to ensure that the Veitacini Treaty becomes an instrument for Pacific-led peace rather than a pathway to deeper militarisation of the Pacific.

As Pacific NGOs have declared 'The Pacific Ocean is not a battlefield. It is our home, our food source, our cultural space and the foundation of our collective future.'

If the Veitacini Treaty is to carry the name "Ocean of Peace", its implementation must first and foremost ensure that peace is a reality for Pacific peoples.

Fiji Medical Association

MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

134 Garvey Drive Domain | PO Box 1116 Suva | Phone: 3315388| Email fmavuniwais@gmail.com

8 September 2026

The Chairperson

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

Parliament of the Republic of Fiji

Government Buildings

Suva

Dear Hon. Lenora Qereqeretabua,

SUBMISSION ON THE FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION AND THE OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE

('VEITACINI TREATY')

1. Introduction

The Fiji Medical Association (FMA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence on the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance, also known as the Veitacini Treaty, currently before Parliament. The FMA represents registered medical practitioners across Fiji and has a direct interest in ensuring that Fiji's external relations continue to support, rather than constrain, the breadth of international partnerships on which our health system relies.

2. Why the FMA has an interest in these treaties

Although the two instruments are framed principally as security and strategic partnership treaties, our members see daily the practical value of Fiji's wide network of health partners.

China has assisted Fijian healthcare infrastructure for over a decade. The China-assisted Navua Hospital, built by Chinese state contractor Yanjian Group and opened in 2014, still serves more than 30,000 residents of the Navua area, and Yanjian was also a stakeholder in the construction of the Navosa Sub-Divisional Hospital in the Nadroga-Navosa highlands, which opened in 2021 and now serves over 10,000 Fijians in that sub-division.

This is in addition to the continuing rotation of Chinese medical teams and specialist missions – including recent cataract-surgery programmes –delivered in Fijian communities and hospitals. Taiwan, through its Trade Mission and the Taiwan ICDF, funds the SOVA NI BULA digital health platform, which has digitized more than 9,000 patient records, supported over 4,100 clinical consultations and trained 88 health professionals, alongside recurring medical missions by Taiwanese hospitals – Mackay Memorial Hospital's seventh mission to Fiji, in May 2026, delivered specialist cardiology, family medicine, obstetric, emergency and dental care at Nadi Hospital and Sarada Medical Centre. South Korea, through KOICA's Strengthening Health Adaptation Project (SHAPE), has funded solar power and climate-resilience upgrades at eighteen health facilities – including the Verata Nursing Station – trained over 600 health workers on climate- related health risks, and strengthened laboratory capacity for disease surveillance. Australia and New Zealand separately fund a significant share of Fiji's health security and workforce programmes; Japan, India, Cuba, the United States and the European Union each contribute equipment, training, scholarships or clinical personnel in their own right.

It is this plurality of partners, not dependence on any single one, that has made Fiji's health system more resilient. Notably, Fiji already sustains simultaneous, functioning health-sector cooperation with both the

People's Republic of China and Taiwan – a working example, in a single sector, of exactly the balance this submission urges the Committee to protect more broadly. The FMA is therefore concerned with any treaty language that, even indirectly, narrows that plurality or signals that cooperation with one strategic partner should come at the expense of others.

3. Fiji's tradition of friendship to all

Fiji has long taken pride in a foreign policy that seeks to be a friend to all countries and an enemy to none.

This tradition has served Fiji well: it has allowed successive Governments to accept development, health, education and infrastructure assistance from a wide range of partners – traditional and non-traditional, large and small – without being asked to choose sides in wider geopolitical contests. For a small Pacific Island state, this flexibility is not a luxury; it is

a core national resilience asset. Locking Fiji more closely into the strategic architecture of any single power, however friendly, risks narrowing that flexibility and inviting reciprocal expectations of alignment that Fiji has historically avoided.

4. Specific concerns with the draft treaties The FMA respectfully draws the Committee's attention to several provisions that, read together, could be understood as moving Fiji away from this tradition of non-alignment: (a) Vetting of third parties in critical infrastructure and technology. Article 4(2)(b) of the Vuvale Union commits the Parties to "engage third parties in their critical infrastructure and technology, and security sectors" only "in a manner that honours the Pacific Way and protects and strengthens the Parties' individual and collective security." Article 4(6) defines "critical infrastructure and technology" broadly to include telecommunications, digital infrastructure, artificial intelligence and cyberspace – categories that overlap substantially with the digital health records, telemedicine platforms and medical technology on which modern healthcare increasingly depends. As presently drafted, it is not clear that engagement with health-related infrastructure and technology partners – including, but not limited to, Chinese-supplied medical equipment, Cuban clinical training arrangements, or other third-country digital-health cooperation – would be excluded from this vetting commitment. We ask the Committee to seek clarity, and where necessary a reservation or interpretive statement, that humanitarian, medical and health-technology cooperation with any friendly state falls outside the scope of Article 4.

(b) Treatment of third-party presence as a security threat. Article 4(3) records that a "third party military or other security base, ongoing presence, arrangements or visits" could be treated as a threat to the Parties' individual or collective security. Independent commentary, including analysis published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies and The Conversation, notes that this and similar clauses in recent Australian security treaties across the Pacific are widely understood to be aimed principally at limiting China's engagement in the region. Whatever the merits of that concern from a defence perspective, the FMA notes that the same broad language, applied expansively, could chill cooperative visits and exchanges that have delivered real health benefits to Fijians – for example, visits by Chinese hospital ships and medical teams, or defence-adjacent humanitarian and disaster-response missions from a range of countries.

(c) A closed rather than open regional architecture. The Veitacini Treaty's accession provision (Article 12) allows other Pacific states to join only "by unanimous consent" of the existing Parties, once those Parties are satisfied the acceding state can "further the purposes and principles of this Treaty." This is a narrower model of regionalism than the consensus-based, Pacific Islands Forum-led architecture that both treaties otherwise invoke, and it positions Australia – named as Depositary under Article 13 – as the administrative centre of an alliance that other Pacific nations may join only at the existing Parties' discretion. The FMA suggests this sits uneasily with the treaties' own repeated invocation of the Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration and the 'Pacific Way'.

(d) Limited dispute-resolution avenues and a long exit process. Both treaties preclude referring disputes over interpretation to any international court, tribunal or other third party (Vuvale Union, Article 8(2); Veitacini Treaty, Article 11(1)), leaving Fiji reliant solely on bilateral

consultation with Australia to resolve any future disagreement. The Vuvale Union also requires twentyfour months' written notice to terminate (Article 10(4)). Together, these provisions mean that once ratified, Fiji would have limited independent recourse and a lengthy exit process should the relationship, or the wider geopolitical environment, change in ways not currently foreseen.

(e) A precedent worth noting. Fiji is not the only Pacific state weighing these trade-offs. Reporting on Vanuatu's more cautious approach to a comparable Australian security treaty notes that Port Vila delayed signature over concern that the agreement would limit its freedom to engage other partners, including China, which remains Vanuatu's largest external creditor. The FMA raises this not to take a position on Vanuatu's decision, but to illustrate that these are live, recognised risks elsewhere in the region – not hypothetical ones.

5. What the FMA is, and is not, saying The FMA is not opposed to the Vuvale Union or the Veitacini Treaty in principle, and does not underestimate the genuine security challenges facing Fiji and the wider Pacific. Australia has been, and continues to be, a generous and valued partner to Fiji's health sector, and closer cooperation on climate security, transnational crime and critical-infrastructure protection can bring real benefits. Our submission is narrower: that ratification should not be allowed to quietly commit Fiji to a posture of strategic alignment with one power to the exclusion of others, and that Fiji's health sector in particular should not become collateral in a wider contest for regional influence in which Fiji has, through its own diplomacy, consistently said it does not wish to take sides.

6. Recommendations

The FMA respectfully recommends that the Committee:

(a) seek from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs a clear, public statement – ideally reflected in an interpretive declaration lodged at ratification – that nothing in either treaty is intended to limit Fiji's freedom to receive health, humanitarian, educational or medical-technology cooperation from any friendly state;

(b) request clarification of how "critical infrastructure and technology" will be defined and applied in practice under Article 4 of the Vuvale Union, with Parliamentary oversight of any guidelines or arrangements made under that Article;

(c) encourage Government to pursue, alongside these bilateral instruments, an inclusive, Pacific Islands Forum-led regional security framework open to accession on Pacific-wide consensus rather than the unanimous consent of a smaller existing membership;

(d) ensure any instrument of ratification is accompanied by a reaffirmation of Fiji's foreign policy of friendship to all nations and enmity to none, so that Parliament's intent is on the public record alongside the treaty text itself; and

(e) build into the work programme of the Vuvale Bukmak and Vuvale Forum (Articles 6 and 7 of the Vuvale Union) a standing requirement to report to Parliament on how the Treaty's security provisions are being applied in practice, so that any drift toward exclusivity can be identified and addressed early.

7. Conclusion

Fiji's ability to draw support, expertise and investment from the widest possible range of friends has been one of the quiet strengths of both our health system and our foreign policy. The FMA asks the Committee to ensure that, in formalising a closer partnership with Australia, Fiji does not inadvertently narrow that strength. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this submission further with the Committee or its Secretariat.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Ronal Kumar

President

Fiji Medical Association

NAYADRA Maritime Intelligence Limited

NAYADRA MARITIME INTELLIGENCE LIMITED

Company No. 17326173 — England and Wales

AI-enabled Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness

2 October 2026

The Chairperson

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

Parliament of the Republic of Fiji

Government Buildings, Suva

By email: *tirisiane.logavatu@legislature.gov.fj and elesi.waiwalu@legislature.gov.fj*

RE: WRITTEN SUBMISSION — FIJI-AUSTRALIA VUVALE UNION AND OCEAN OF PEACE ALLIANCE ('VEITACINI TREATY')

Dear Honourable Chairperson,

NAYADRA Maritime Intelligence Limited welcomes the opportunity to make a written submission to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence on the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance ('Veitacini Treaty'). NAYADRA is a UK-registered maritime intelligence company developing NA.YADRA, an AI-enabled maritime domain awareness platform designed for Pacific Island agencies, and our founder brings direct operational and technical experience supporting maritime security and border protection efforts in the region.

Our submission focuses narrowly on the maritime domain awareness, border protection, transnational crime and data sovereignty dimensions of the two treaties, an area in which we believe practical, evidence-based comment may assist the Committee, and it engages with the specific provisions of each treaty text and the Committee's own hearing record.

1. Where the two treaties speak to maritime domain awareness

The substantive commitments in this area sit primarily in the Vuvale Union, not the Veitacini Treaty. Article 4(4) of the Vuvale Union commits both Parties to "action to address transnational crime and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing" (4(4)(c)), "strengthening the security of critical infrastructure and technology and cyberspace" (4(4)(d)), and "integrated policing, defence and border protection" (4(4)(e)). Article 4(6) confirms that "critical infrastructure and technology" for these purposes includes artificial intelligence, cyberspace and quantum computing. Article 3(7) separately commits the Parties to "strengthening border management systems."

By contrast, the Veitacini Treaty is a high-level mutual defence framework and does not itself detail border protection, cyber or transnational-crime measures. Its operative relevance to this area is Article 7 (Visiting Forces), under which the Parties will “develop and maintain bilateral and multilateral visiting forces agreements and arrangements” to give effect to cooperation, consultation and mutual defence, and Article 8 (Governance), which leaves consultation mechanisms for implementation to be determined by the Parties. In practice, any maritime domain awareness cooperation conducted under the Veitacini Treaty would be delivered through these implementing arrangements rather than the Treaty text itself.

2. The capability gap these provisions should be read against

In our experience, Fiji's maritime security challenge is less a shortage of surveillance data and vessel-tracking access already exists through more than one commercial platform, and more a shortage of analyst capacity and continuous monitoring to convert that data into timely, actionable intelligence. Illicit maritime activity, including narcotics trafficking, has in some cases continued to move through Fijian waters despite existing tracking coverage, because raw data was not analysed and escalated in time to enable interdiction. We raise this because Article 4(4)(c) and (e) of the Vuvale Union will only translate into practical gains against transnational crime and IUU fishing if implementation funds capacity to act on data, not only the data or platforms themselves.

3. Data sovereignty and jurisdiction

The Committee's hearings since 2 September have surfaced a live and, in our respectful view, only partially resolved question bearing on Vuvale Union Article 4(4)(d): not merely where government or agency data is stored, but what law and whose courts have authority over it. Officials have given clear and welcome assurances on ownership and access,for example, that the new MERIT border management system will be Fiji-owned and will not give external parties a backdoor into data protected under Fiji's Privacy Act, and that Fiji retains “manage, own and control” as the test for any disaster-recovery infrastructure placed offshore. Ownership and access are, however, distinct from jurisdiction: data held, processed or backed up outside Fiji may remain

subject to a foreign jurisdiction's legal process a warrant, subpoena or national-security order, regardless of who nominally owns it.

This is not a theoretical concern. The Australia-US CLOUD Act Agreement entered into force on 31 January 2026. The major cloud platforms used by governments in the region, including Google Cloud, Amazon Web Services and Microsoft Azure - are US-incorporated entities. Under this Agreement, United States law enforcement now has a direct, treaty-backed channel to compel data from any US-incorporated provider's Australian data centres, regardless of the physical Australian location of that data. Should Fijian government or maritime security data come to be hosted, backed up, or processed through such providers' Australian regions as part of cooperation under the Vuvale Union or Veitacini Treaty, that data would in practice be reachable by United States legal process as well as Australian, notwithstanding any assurance that the data itself remains physically in Australia or under Fijian ownership. We raise this not to discourage the use of reputable cloud infrastructure, which offers genuine security and resilience benefits, but to underline that jurisdiction follows the incorporation of the provider as much as the location of the server and should be addressed explicitly rather than assumed.

We note that the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service, in its own evidence to the Committee on 6 September, stressed that expanded border security cooperation “must respect Fiji's sovereignty and decision-making” given its effect on how the Service manages passenger, cargo, intelligence and revenue information. We agree and respectfully suggest this principle should extend explicitly to governing law and jurisdiction, not only to ownership and operational control.

We therefore recommend the Committee consider recommending that any implementing arrangement made under Vuvale Union Article 4(4)(d)-(e), or under the Veitacini Treaty's visiting forces or governance provisions (Articles 7 and 8), explicitly specify: (a) the governing law applicable to any Fijian government or agency data processed, stored or backed up outside Fiji, including where infrastructure is provided by third-party cloud vendors; (b) which courts or authorities, including under instruments such as the Australia-US CLOUD Act Agreement, have jurisdiction over that data; and (c) audit or inspection rights available to the Fijian party to verify compliance. Specifying governing law and jurisdiction alongside ownership is standard practice in commercial and government technology contracting internationally, and its absence from the public record to date appears to reflect the early stage of drafting rather than a deliberate omission.

4. Implications for implementation

We respectfully suggest the Committee consider recommending that implementation arrangements for both treaties including the Vuvale Union Work Plan to be developed by the Vuvale Bukmak under Article 7 of that Treaty, and any visiting forces

arrangements concluded under Article 7 of the Veitacini Treaty and give explicit weight to:

- Analyst capacity and workflow, not only sensor and platform procurement, when funding the border protection and anti-transnational-crime commitments in Vuvale Union Article 4(4)(c)-(e);
- Interoperability and data-sharing standards between Fijian agencies (Fiji Revenue and Customs Service, Fiji Navy, Fiji Police) and Australian counterparts, so that cooperation under the treaties strengthens a shared operating picture rather than adding parallel, disconnected systems;
- Support for Fijian-based and Pacific-based technical capability, including local firms and analysts, alongside government-to-government cooperation, so that cooperation under Vuvale Union Article 4(4)(d)-(e) builds sovereign Fijian capability rather than dependency; and
- Clear reporting lines from the Vuvale Bukmak and any Veitacini Treaty consultation mechanism (Article 8) to Parliament and relevant Fijian agencies, so that maritime domain awareness gains and the jurisdictional safeguards recommended in Section 3 above are institutionalised beyond the tenure of any single work plan or visiting-forces arrangement.

5. Offer of further assistance

NAYADRA would welcome the opportunity to expand on any of the above in a face-to-face submission, and to share further technical detail with the Committee or its Secretariat on request.

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to contribute to its consideration of these important treaties.

Yours faithfully,

Isimeli Moce Averia

Founder & Director

NAYADRA Maritime Intelligence Limited

Tertiary Scholarships And Loans Service

Tertiary Scholarships & Loans Service
Empowering Fiji's Future

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TERTIARY SCHOLARSHIPS AND LOANS SERVICE

FORMAL SUBMISSION

to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty)

TSLS supports the Treaties as an opportunity to reposition education, skills and human-capital mobility as core instruments of Fiji's long-term economic security, resilience and regional leadership.

Submitted by:

Dr Apisalome Movono
Chief Executive Officer
Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service

15 September 2026 | Suva, Fiji

1. Executive Summary

The Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service (TSLS) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty). TSLS views the Treaties not only through the lens of foreign affairs and security, but also through the practical question of how Fiji builds the knowledge, skills, professional capability and institutional resilience required to sustain its sovereignty, prosperity and regional leadership over the next decade.

The Vuvale Union expressly links prosperity, people, mobility, digital transition, quality education, resilient infrastructure and economic security. This is directly relevant to TSLS. Fiji's future security will depend increasingly on whether the country can educate, retain, circulate and productively deploy its people in areas such as digital technology,

cybersecurity, maritime capability, engineering, health, climate adaptation, logistics, agriculture, data science, public administration and other priority disciplines.

The education initiatives identified for the proposed 10-Year Work Plan are potentially transformative. In particular, the proposed access for selected Fijian students to Australian educational institutions at domestic-equivalent rates from approximately 2029/30, through cofunded arrangements, could materially increase the value obtained from public scholarship expenditure. The proposed TVET Regional Centre of Excellence in foundational digital skills, with potential expansion into maritime skills, could likewise address critical national and regional capability gaps.

TSLS therefore supports the education and skills direction of the Vuvale Union, subject to an implementation framework that is fiscally sustainable, transparent, equitable and explicitly tied to Fiji's workforce and development priorities. The opportunity should be designed as a long-term human-capital partnership rather than a stand-alone scholarship expansion.

TSLS recommends that the 10-Year Work Plan establish a dedicated Fiji-Australia Human Capital and Skills Framework, with clear governance, multi-year financing, measurable workforce outcomes, data-sharing arrangements, student welfare and mobility safeguards, and periodic joint review. This should deliberately connect scholarships, TVET, work-integrated learning, circular mobility, professional placements, return pathways and graduate tracking.

Key recommendations at a glance

- Establish a Fiji-Australia Human Capital and Skills Framework under the 10-Year Work Plan, with TSLS represented in its governance.
- Design the domestic-equivalent-rate initiative as a co-funded, priority-skills programme with transparent selection criteria, predictable multi-year funding and full-cost planning.
- Use the initiative to target national capability gaps, rather than creating a broad or demand-driven overseas scholarship scheme.
- Embed circular mobility: study, structured work experience, professional exposure and a supported pathway back to Fiji or into Fiji-linked regional service.
- Develop the Digital and Maritime TVET Centres of Excellence as Fiji-owned regional institutions, with industry-led curricula, train-the-trainer capability and strong qualification recognition.
- Create secure bilateral data arrangements for enrolment verification, student progress, graduate outcomes, employment and mobility tracking.
- Build equity safeguards for students from rural, maritime and low-income communities and for persons with disabilities, while maintaining merit and national-priority alignment.
- Adopt a 10-year results framework with annual reporting and formal review points in 2028/29, 2031/32 and 2034/35.

2. TSLS Mandate and Strategic Perspective

TSLS administers Government-funded tertiary scholarships and related student support and therefore sits at the point where national development priorities are translated into individual education pathways. Its role is not simply to finance study; it is to help ensure that public investment in tertiary education produces the capabilities Fiji requires.

For the purposes of the Treaties, TSLS considers human capital to be a strategic national asset. Education policy, scholarship design, skills formation and graduate mobility should be treated as components of economic and national resilience. The same engineers, health professionals, digital specialists, maritime officers, researchers, educators, public servants and technicians who support economic development also underpin disaster response, critical infrastructure, cyber resilience, border systems, health security and national continuity.

TSLS proposes a shift from a 'scholarship places' mindset to a 'national capability pipeline' mindset.

3. TSLS Role in Development and Proposed Implementation

TSLS was not the negotiating agency for the Treaties. Its role arises principally at the implementation stage, where treaty-level commitments concerning education, mobility, skills and human development must be converted into operational programmes, funding arrangements and student-level outcomes.

TSLS can contribute to implementation in five practical capacities:

- Programme design and targeting - translating agreed treaty priorities into scholarship categories, eligibility criteria, programme lists and annual awards.
- Funding administration - managing Fiji's contribution to co-funded arrangements, subject to Government policy and appropriation.
- Student lifecycle management - application, award, enrolment verification, progress monitoring, allowances, travel, welfare, completion and any return-service or bond obligations.
- Data and outcomes - using student and graduate information to assess completion, employment, return, mobility and the national value generated by public investment.
- Policy advice - advising Government on demand, costs, equity, programme performance, labourmarket needs and whether initiatives should be scaled, redesigned or paused.

4. Treaty Provisions Directly Relevant to TSLS

Article 3 of the Vuvale Union, 'Prosperity and People', is the principal treaty provision relevant to TSLS. It commits the Parties to inclusive development pathways that place economic, social, environmental and human dignity at the centre of lasting peace and resilience; to deepen economic and people-topeople links; and to enhance economic growth and security, the transition to a digital economy, and cultural and people linkages including through mobility.

The same Article recognises that economic growth and security require, among other things, quality education, fiscal stability and resilient infrastructure, and that the digital transition requires safe and secure digital infrastructure and systems. It also links deeper people connections with mobility and stronger border-management settings.

These provisions are significant because they place education and mobility inside a broader resilience architecture. For TSLS, that means scholarship and skills programmes under the Treaty should be judged not only by enrolment and graduation, but by the capabilities they create for Fiji.

The Veitacini Treaty is primarily a mutual defence and security instrument. TSLS does not have a defence mandate; however, the capability requirements implied by the Treaty - including cybersecurity, digital systems, maritime capability, engineering, logistics, health, emergency response, intelligencesupporting disciplines and public-sector capability - create downstream human-capital requirements. TSLS can support those requirements through appropriately targeted tertiary education pathways, while remaining within its statutory mandate.

5. Existing Fiji-Australia Education Cooperation and the Opportunity to Build on It

The background provided to TSLS demonstrates that the proposed initiatives will sit within an already substantial education partnership. Australia is identified as Fiji's longest-standing and largest development partner in education, supporting schooling, tertiary study and skills development.

Programme / Initiative	Scale in source material	Current contribution	Forward opportunity
Australia-Fiji Education Program (AFEP)	AU$25m / FJ$37m, 2024-2029	Literacy, numeracy, teaching, learning, leadership, inclusion, climate resilience and localisation.	Strengthen the pipeline from school outcomes into tertiary readiness and priority skills.
Pacific Australia Skills	AU$229.5m / FJ$326.31m regionally, 2025-2029	Skills-system strengthening and training for employment, including digital and maritime skills.	Align TVET centres, qualification pathways and industry demand with Fiji's workforce priorities.
Australia Awards	AU$6.5m / FJ$9m annually; more than 700 scholarships to Fijians since 2012	Masters, Bachelors, Diplomas and Certificates in Australia and the Pacific.	Coordinate rather than duplicate; build complementary pathways and shared outcomes tracking.
Domestic-equivalent-rate initiative	Proposed AU$29.5m / FJ$46m from approximately 2029/30	New mechanism for selected Fijian students to access Australian education at domestic-equivalent rates.	Potentially transformative if co-funded, targeted and linked to workforce outcomes.

6. Proposed TSLS Role under the 10-Year Work Plan

TSLS recommends that the 10-Year Work Plan treat education and skills as a coherent portfolio with a defined implementation architecture. The Work Plan should be sufficiently specific to create accountability while remaining flexible enough to respond to labour-market and geopolitical change.

6.1 Proposed Fiji-Australia Human Capital and Skills Framework

TSLS recommends establishing a dedicated Fiji-Australia Human Capital and Skills Framework under the Vuvale Union. The Framework would bring together scholarships, TVET, professional mobility, work-integrated learning, research and graduate outcomes.

- A joint steering mechanism led by the relevant Fiji and Australian ministries, with TSLS, higher education and TVET agencies represented.
- An agreed list of national and regional priority skill areas, refreshed at least every two years.
- A multi-year financing envelope and cost-sharing principles.
- Common performance indicators covering access, completion, time-to-completion, employment, return, retention, circular mobility and service in priority sectors.
- Student welfare, safeguarding, disability support and pastoral-care standards.
- Secure data-sharing and privacy arrangements.
- A structured process for universities, TVET providers, employers and professional bodies to advise on demand and programme quality.

7. Domestic-Equivalent Australian Education Rates: TSLS Position

The proposal to enable selected Fijian students to access Australian educational facilities at domesticequivalent rates from approximately 2029/30 is one of the most consequential education commitments in the material provided to TSLS. It has the potential to significantly lower tuition cost relative to normal international fees and therefore to increase the number, quality or breadth of opportunities available for the same level of public investment.

TSLS supports the initiative in principle. However, value will depend on programme design. Lower tuition prices should not automatically translate into an open-ended expansion of overseas awards. The financial gain should be used strategically: to fill scarce-skill gaps, improve quality, support specialised programmes not available locally, and create structured pathways that strengthen Fiji's economy.

7.1 Recommended design principles

National-priority targeting: Awards should be linked to periodically updated workforce and capability priorities, including digital, cybersecurity, maritime, engineering, health, climate and environmental sciences, data, agriculture, logistics, teaching in shortage areas and other Governmentidentified needs.

Additionality: The initiative should complement Fiji's domestic tertiary sector, not displace programmes that can be delivered locally at good quality and lower whole-of-government cost.

Full-cost budgeting: Decisions should consider tuition, living costs, travel, insurance, visa costs, placement costs, exchange-rate exposure and student support - not tuition alone.

Co-funding certainty: The Fiji and Australia shares of costs should be agreed on a multi-year basis so TSLS is not left with unfunded commitments after students have commenced.

Equity and merit: Selection must remain competitive while ensuring that talented students from rural, maritime, low-income and otherwise underrepresented communities can participate.

Student success: Universities should provide timely progress data, early-warning information and support for students at academic or welfare risk.

Return and circularity: Programme settings should encourage skills circulation rather than permanent loss of publicly funded talent.

7.2 Circular mobility rather than one-way migration

The Treaty links education with mobility. TSLS recommends that mobility be deliberately designed as circular. A strong model would allow selected students to study in Australia, undertake structured internships or limited post-study professional experience, and then return to Fiji with strengthened capability, professional networks and recognised experience.

Where national policy permits, return obligations can be designed more flexibly around service outcomes rather than a purely geographic test. For example, service to a Fiji-based employer, a regional organisation headquartered in Fiji, an approved national project, or a recognised skills-transfer arrangement could count toward an agreed public-value obligation. Any such change would require policy and legal review.

8. TVET Regional Centres of Excellence: A Strategic Opportunity

The proposed Regional Centre of Excellence for foundational digital skills, with possible expansion to a second centre focused on maritime skills, closely aligns with Fiji's development and security needs. TSLS considers these centres potentially more important than any single scholarship scheme because they can create sustained domestic and regional training capacity.

8.1 Digital skills centre

- Foundational digital literacy and workplace technology for school leavers and workers.
- Cybersecurity, network administration, cloud systems, data analytics, AI-enabled productivity and digital public services.
- Train-the-trainer programmes to expand Fiji's teaching capacity.
- Short courses, micro-credentials and stackable qualifications linked to formal certificates and diplomas.

• Industry partnerships and applied projects using real public- and private-sector problems.

- Pathways for students in rural and maritime areas through blended and distributed delivery.

8.2 Maritime skills centre

- Seafaring, marine engineering, vessel systems, port operations and logistics.
- Maritime safety, surveillance-supporting technical skills and emergency response.
- Blue-economy skills including fisheries technology, marine conservation, ocean data and coastal resilience.
- Qualification alignment with recognised regional and international standards to improve employability.
- Strong links to Fiji's maritime institutions, employers and Pacific regional demand.

8.3 Governance principles for both centres

The centres should be Fiji-owned in purpose and sustainable beyond the initial funding cycle. Governance should include Government, training institutions, industry and, where appropriate, regional partners. Australian technical support should build Fijian capability and progressively localise training leadership. Funding should include not only capital expenditure but also recurrent costs, trainers, equipment renewal, digital licences, maintenance and quality assurance.

9. Data, Digital Systems and Evidence-Based Scholarship Management

The Vuvale Union's emphasis on the transition to a secure digital economy has direct relevance to scholarship administration. TSLS is already moving toward stronger data capability and digital management. Treaty implementation creates an opportunity to establish a modern bilateral data environment around student participation and outcomes.

Subject to law and appropriate consent, TSLS recommends interoperable arrangements that allow timely verification of enrolment, course load, academic progress, completion and student status with participating Australian institutions. Over time, data should also support graduate employment and mobility analysis.

Within Fiji, stronger integration across Government data holdings can improve graduate tracking, planning and accountability. In the bilateral context, equivalent safeguards are required for privacy, cyber security, access control, data minimisation, retention and incident response.

10. Climate, Ocean and Security-Related Human Capital

The Treaties are grounded in an expanded conception of security that includes climate, economic resilience and regional stability. TSLS recommends that the education work programme reflect this directly through priority fields and interdisciplinary training.

Strategic challenge	Priority capability areas	Possible education response
Climate and disaster resilience	Climate science, civil engineering, adaptation, disaster risk management, water, food systems	Targeted scholarships, applied research, professional short courses
Digital and cyber resilience	Cybersecurity, data, networks, secure systems, AI governance	TVET centre, degree pathways, publicsector upskilling
Maritime and ocean security	Marine engineering, ports, seafaring, ocean data, fisheries, logistics	Maritime centre, cadetships, industry placements
Health security	Medicine, nursing, public health, laboratory science, counselling, health systems	Priority scholarships and specialist pathways
Economic resilience	Engineering, logistics, finance, trade, agriculture, productivity, entrepreneurship	Scholarships linked to sector strategies and employer demand
Public-sector capability	Policy, digital government, procurement, programme management, regulatory and border systems	Professional fellowships and targeted postgraduate study

11. Anticipated Benefits and Opportunities for Fiji

Greater value from public education expenditure: Domestic-equivalent pricing can lower tuition costs and allow more targeted use of scholarship funds.

A deeper pipeline of scarce skills: The Work Plan can deliberately build professionals and technicians in fields that constrain Fiji's development.

Improved quality and exposure: Students and trainers can access specialist facilities, industry networks and professional practice not always available domestically.

Regional leadership: Fiji can strengthen its role as a Pacific hub for TVET, education, maritime capability and digital skills.

Stronger bilateral networks: Alumni, employers, institutions and professional bodies can form durable Fiji-Australia links beyond government-to-government engagement.

Resilience and sovereignty: A stronger domestic skills base reduces dependence on externally supplied expertise in critical systems.

Mobility with development value: Circular pathways can produce remittances and international experience while retaining a clear pathway back to Fiji.

12. Legislative, Policy, Regulatory and Administrative Requirements

The source material notes that providing Fijians access to Australian university places at domesticequivalent rates will require significant legislative and regulatory change in Australia,

with implementation anticipated around 2029/30. Fiji should use the lead time to complete its own policy and administrative readiness.

Area	Required action
Scholarship policy and TSLS instruments	Review eligibility, co-funding authority, award conditions, progress requirements, deferral, termination, return-service and recovery provisions.
Public finance and appropriation	Ensure multi-year commitments can be entered into responsibly and are reflected in annual budgeting and forward estimates.
Data protection and sharing	Establish lawful, secure exchange of student and graduate data between TSLS, Fiji agencies and participating Australian institutions.
Qualification recognition	Align with relevant Fiji and Australian quality assurance and professional recognition requirements.
Immigration and mobility	Coordinate visa, work-right and post-study settings with the intended circular-mobility model.
Institutional agreements	Develop clear agreements with participating universities and TVET providers covering fees, data, welfare, academic support, refunds and student status.
Monitoring and evaluation	Define a common results framework, reporting schedule and review mechanism for the 10-Year Work Plan.

13. Financial, Staffing, Infrastructure and Capacity Implications

TSLS supports a staged approach that avoids creating unfunded obligations. The cost of the education package should be assessed over the full student lifecycle and over the full 10-year horizon.

- Financial: Fiji co-funding, student living support, travel, insurance, exchange-rate volatility, administration, student welfare and monitoring.
- Staffing: additional programme, data, finance, compliance and student-support capability may be required as participation grows.
- Systems: secure digital interfaces with Australian providers and strengthened TSLS casemanagement and analytics capability.
- TVET infrastructure: facilities, equipment, connectivity, trainer development, curriculum renewal and recurrent maintenance.
- Capacity building: negotiation, contract management, data governance, monitoring and evaluation, and international student case management.

The background material records a wider Australian commitment of FJD$1.5 billion to support longterm development, economic resilience and security. TSLS recommends that education and skills commitments be accompanied by clearly identified programme envelopes and

predictable multi-year resourcing, so that student and institutional commitments are sustainable once made.

14. Key Risks and Proposed Mitigations

Risk	Why it matters	Recommended mitigation
Brain drain / permanent loss of scarce talent	Public investment may strengthen another labour market rather than Fiji's.	Use circular mobility, return pathways, Fiji-linked service obligations and employer partnerships.
Cost escalation and exchange-rate risk	Lower tuition does not remove living, travel and support costs.	Full-cost modelling, annual cost caps, contingency provisions and multi-year co-funding.
Duplication of existing schemes	Fragmentation can reduce value and confuse applicants.	Map Australia Awards, Pacific Australia Skills and TSLS schemes and define complementary roles.
Overconcentration in one partner or destination	Fiji requires diversified international education relationships.	Use the Vuvale opportunity strategically while preserving broader scholarship partnerships.
Weak alignment with labour demand	Graduates may return to limited employment opportunities.	Use workforce evidence, employer commitments and periodic priority-list review.
Inequitable access	Overseas opportunities may favour students with greater social or geographic advantage.	Targeted outreach, transparent criteria, bridging support and disability inclusion.
Student welfare and academic failure	Overseas study has higher financial and personal consequences.	Pre-departure preparation, provider obligations, early-warning data and case management.
Data and cyber risk	Cross-border student data is sensitive.	Privacy-by-design, minimum necessary data, secure interfaces and incident protocols.
Unsustainable TVET centres	Capital investment can fail without recurrent funding and local ownership.	Lifecycle funding, governance clarity, localisation targets and industry revenue/partnership models.
Policy discontinuity	A 10-year programme spans electoral and administrative cycles.	Treaty-linked governance, published results, scheduled review and documented multi-year commitments.

15. Proposed 10-Year Implementation Roadmap

Phase	Period	Priority actions	Expected position by end of phase

Phase 1: Foundation	2026-2028/29	Joint governance; legal and regulatory mapping; workforce-priority framework; feasibility and design of TVET centres; data standards; co-funding model; provider engagement; baseline outcomes.	Fiji is implementation-ready, with agreed rules, costs, priorities, governance and measurable baselines.
Phase 2: Launch and scale	2029/30-2031/32	Commence domestic-rate places; operationalise digital centre; develop maritime centre; introduce structured internships and circular mobility; live studentoutcomes dashboard.	Programmes are operating at controlled scale with evidence of student success and employer uptake.
Phase 3: Consolidation	2032/33-2034/35	Scale high-performing disciplines; close or redesign weak pathways; increase trainer localisation; regionalise selected TVET offerings; strengthen alumni and skills-transfer networks.	The system shifts from programme delivery to sustained capability-building and regional service.
Phase 4: Maturity and renewal	2035/36 onward	Independent impact evaluation; assess fiscal sustainability; refresh treaty work plan; institutionalise successful models.	Fiji has a durable humancapital partnership with demonstrated economic, resilience and regional outcomes.

16. Proposed Results and Accountability Framework

TSLS recommends a small set of public, outcome-focused indicators. The purpose should be to demonstrate whether the partnership is building Fiji's capability, not merely counting activity.

- Number and proportion of awards in agreed national-priority skill areas.
- Completion rate and average time to completion.
- Annual public cost per successful graduate, including total support costs.
- Graduate employment within 6 and 12 months, by sector and location.
- Proportion of graduates returning to Fiji, serving Fiji-linked organisations, or participating in approved circular-mobility pathways.
- Employer satisfaction and evidence of skills-shortage reduction.
- Participation by rural, maritime, low-income and other underrepresented groups.
- Number of Fiji-based trainers qualified through the Centres of Excellence.
- Regional enrolment and service reach of the TVET centres.
- Cybersecurity, privacy and data-quality compliance.

17. Recommendations to the Standing Committee

1. That the Committee note TSLS's support in principle for the education, skills and mobility dimensions of the Vuvale Union and their potential contribution to Fiji's economic security and resilience.
2. That the 10-Year Work Plan include a clearly defined Fiji-Australia Human Capital and Skills Framework rather than treating scholarships, TVET and mobility as separate projects.
3. That TSLS be formally included in the design and implementation governance of the domesticequivalent-rate education initiative and related scholarship arrangements.
4. That the domestic-equivalent-rate initiative be targeted to national-priority and scarce-skill areas, with safeguards against duplication and displacement of quality Fiji-based provision.
5. That Fiji and Australia agree predictable multi-year cost-sharing arrangements before student cohorts are committed, including clarity on tuition, living support and other full-lifecycle costs.
6. That circular mobility, professional placements and supported return pathways be embedded in programme design to maximise the development value of publicly funded study.
7. That the proposed Digital and Maritime TVET Centres of Excellence be developed with strong Fiji ownership, industry participation, trainer localisation, recurrent funding and recognised qualifications.
8. That the Work Plan include secure student and graduate data-sharing arrangements, consistent with privacy, cybersecurity and lawful-use requirements in both jurisdictions.
9. That equity, disability inclusion and access for students from rural and maritime communities be built into programme design from inception.
10. That an agreed results framework, annual reporting and scheduled independent reviews be included in the implementation architecture.
11. That the Treaty education package remain flexible enough to respond to emerging capability needs, including climate resilience, health security, cyber threats, maritime capability and digital transformation.
12. That implementation be based on the principle of additionality: the partnership should strengthen Fiji's own institutions and capability, not create long-term dependency on offshore provision.

18. Conclusion

The Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union creates an opportunity to move the education relationship from a collection of valuable programmes to a long-term strategic human-capital partnership. TSLS considers this particularly important because the security challenges facing Fiji over the next decade will increasingly be capability challenges: whether Fiji has enough skilled people, whether they are trained to the required standard, whether institutions can retain and deploy them, and whether international mobility strengthens rather than depletes the country.

TSLS therefore encourages the Committee to view the education commitments as part of the core architecture of national resilience. Properly designed, the domestic-equivalent-rate initiative, the TVET Centres of Excellence, strengthened mobility and deeper data cooperation

can deliver benefits well beyond individual scholarship recipients. They can support a more productive economy, a stronger public service, greater climate and maritime resilience, improved digital capability, deeper FijiAustralia people links and a more capable Pacific region.

The central implementation test should be simple: after ten years, is Fiji demonstrably more capable, more resilient and better able to educate, retain, circulate and deploy its own people? TSLS stands ready to work with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Government of Australia, tertiary and TVET institutions, employers and other stakeholders to ensure that the answer is yes.

Appendix A - Suggested 10-Minute Opening Statement

Madam Chair, Honourable Members of the Standing Committee, vinaka vakalevu for the opportunity to appear before you on behalf of the Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service.

TSLS welcomes the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance as important longterm frameworks for cooperation between two countries with deep historical, people-to-people and institutional ties.

From the perspective of TSLS, the most important point is that these Treaties recognise something that is increasingly clear: national security and national development are inseparable from human capability. A country is more resilient when it has the people and skills to run its hospitals, maintain its infrastructure, protect its digital systems, manage its maritime domain, respond to disasters, grow its economy and lead its own institutions.

Article 3 of the Vuvale Union is therefore particularly relevant to us. It links prosperity and people, quality education, the digital economy and mobility. The education background provided to TSLS identifies two major initiatives under the proposed 10-Year Work Plan: first, access for selected Fijian students to Australian educational institutions at domestic-equivalent rates through co-funded arrangements from approximately 2029/30; and second, the establishment of a TVET Regional Centre of Excellence in foundational digital skills, with potential expansion into maritime skills.

TSLS supports these initiatives in principle. The domestic-rate proposal could materially reduce the cost of tertiary education in Australia compared with normal international fees. But we believe the greatest value will come if the initiative is carefully targeted. It should fill capability gaps that Fiji cannot easily meet domestically and should complement, not displace, our own tertiary institutions.

We would therefore propose a Fiji-Australia Human Capital and Skills Framework under the 10-Year Work Plan. This would connect scholarships, TVET, work placements, professional mobility, graduate tracking and workforce planning within one coherent architecture.

We also believe mobility should be circular rather than one-way. For selected students, the ideal pathway may be to study in Australia, gain structured professional experience, and

return to Fiji with stronger expertise and networks. The objective should be skills circulation and skills transfer, not the permanent loss of scarce publicly funded talent.

The proposed Digital and Maritime Centres of Excellence are equally significant. If designed well, they can create sustainable capability inside Fiji and serve the wider Pacific. Their success will depend on Fiji ownership, industry participation, recognised qualifications, strong trainer development and recurrent funding - not only buildings and equipment.

There are also practical matters that must be resolved before implementation: multi-year co-funding, data sharing, student welfare, qualification recognition, visa and work settings, equity of access, privacy and cyber security, and the treatment of any return-service obligations.

TSLS recommends that the programme be measured by outcomes rather than only numbers. We should know how many students complete, how much each successful graduate costs, whether graduates enter priority sectors, whether skills shortages reduce, whether students return or maintain Fiji-linked service, and whether the TVET centres progressively build local training capacity.

Madam Chair and Honourable Members, TSLS sees these Treaties as a significant opportunity. But the opportunity is larger than sending more students overseas. It is the opportunity to build a long-term human-capital partnership that makes Fiji more capable, more resilient and more able to lead in the Pacific.

TSLS stands ready to work with Government, Australia, our tertiary institutions and employers to turn these treaty commitments into measurable outcomes for Fiji's people. Vinaka vakalevu.

Appendix B - Source Documents Reviewed

- Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, Invitation to Provide a Public Submission - Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty), 10 September 2026.
- Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union (Treaty text).
- Ocean of Peace Alliance, also known as the Veitacini Treaty (Treaty text).
- Written Analysis: Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union (Vuvale Union) and Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty).
- Background - Vuvale Union Treaty commitments in education, September 2026.

Note on scope: This submission is framed from the statutory and operational perspective of TSLS. Matters of defence policy, treaty ratification, foreign policy and constitutional interpretation are left to the agencies with the relevant mandates.

OceanBit APAC Pty Ltd

SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

Submi4ed by: OceanBit APAC Pty Ltd
Loca6on: Sydney, Australia
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Date: 2 October 2026

Introduction

The Vuvale Union establishes a significant framework for Australia's and Fiji's long-term cooperaOon on resilience, climate security, criOcal infrastructure and net-zero transformaOon.

Energy security should therefore be an iden6fiable component of the Work Plan.

This submission considers how the Vuvale Union can support Fiji's long-term energy security and resilience, consistent with the Treaty's commitments to climate security, net-zero transformaOon and the protecOon of criOcal infrastructure. It does not seek to prescribe a parOcular energy technology or project. Rather, it proposes energy-security and energy-transiOon be explicitly considered within the implementaOon of the Vuvale Union, and that Fiji should own the evidence and informaOon required to determine its own future energy pathway.

Background

OceanBit APAC, is an Australian enOty established to commercialise proprietary Ocean Thermal
Energy Conversion (OTEC) technology and progress prospecOve developments across the Australasian and Pacific regions. The technology is intended to produce affordable, predictable baseload renewable energy by uOlising the naturally occurring temperature difference between warm surface seawater and cold deep-ocean water. The region is parOcularly suited to OTEC development due to year-round warm surface waters, access to deep-ocean water comparaOvely close to island coastlines, and the concentraOon of populaOon centres near the coast. OceanBit APAC's specific interest in ocean energy is addressed later in this submission.

OceanBit Holdings (Fiji) Pte Ltd (registraOon in progress) is being established as a Fiji-registered development company to a[ract investment into scalable offshore baseload renewable energy faciliOes, providing Fiji with an alternaOve to diesel-based generaOon. The company's objecOve is to support the transiOon to clean power, strengthen energy security, and contribute to long-term economic resilience in Fiji.

Recommendations

This submission's recommendaOons to the Commi[ee are:

1. That the Commi[ee recommend that the Vuvale Union Work Plan, and any associated side le[ers or implementaOon instruments, be published in full before Parliament is asked to approve the Treaty, with allocaOons idenOfied by sector and responsible ministry.

2. That the Commi[ee seek clarificaOon from Foreign Affairs, Public Works and the Department of Energy as to whether electricity generaOon, transmission and grid resilience are included within the reported infrastructure allocaOon and, if so, the proporOon allocated to these purposes.

3. That the Commi[ee recommend that the Vuvale Union Work Plan include an idenOfied energy-security and energy-transiOon stream, giving pracOcal effect to the Treaty's commitments to net-zero economic transformaOon and the protecOon of criOcal energy infrastructure.

4. That the Commi[ee recommend that implementaOon of ArOcle 4(6) consider generaOon adequacy and electricity-system resilience alongside the physical protecOon of exisOng energy infrastructure.

5. That any energy-security or energy-transiOon stream under the Work Plan be technologyneutral, compeOOvely procured where appropriate, and preserve Fiji's authority over the allocaOon and selecOon of projects.

6. That the Commi[ee seek clarificaOon as to which of Fiji's renewable-energy targets the Vuvale Union programme is intended to support, noOng that different official documents refer to different target years.

7. That the Commi[ee recommend consideraOon of funding for an independent naOonal ocean-energy resource assessment, procured and owned by Fiji, to establish a naOonal evidence base on the country's ocean-energy resources and associated marine condiOons.

Commentary

1. The Vuvale Union provides a framework for cooperaOon on security, resilience, climate change and economic development. The Treaty also commits Australia and Fiji to net-zero economic transformaOon and idenOfies energy infrastructure as criOcal infrastructure. Energy security therefore has a clear place within the implementaOon of the Union. Reliable electricity is essenOal to Fiji's economy, essenOal services and criOcal infrastructure.

Recommenda6on 1

2. Fiji remains exposed to imported fuel costs and internaOonal energy-price volaOlity. A resilient electricity system requires reliable generaOon as well as secure infrastructure. Fiji's transiOon to renewable energy should therefore consider both the amount and the reliability of generaOon. Renewable energy can reduce reliance on imported fuels, while a diverse generaOon mix can strengthen system resilience.

Recommenda6on 2

3. The opportunity within the Work Plan is a chance to translate the Treaty commitments into pracOcal cooperaOon. Energy-security and energy-transiOon should be idenOfied as a specific area of cooperaOon within the Work Plan. This should be **technology-neutral**, allowing Fiji to determine which technologies and projects best meet its needs.

Recommenda6on 3 **Recommenda6on 4** **Recommenda6on 5**

4. Building the evidence base for Fiji's future energy choices using independent naOonal assessment of Fiji's ocean-energy resources would provide informaOon on the potenOal for ocean-based generaOon, without commicng Fiji to a parOcular technology. The resulOng marine data could also support wider planning, including fisheries, marine infrastructure, cable rouOng and coastal adaptaOon.

Recommenda6on 6

5. Ocean Thermal Energy Conversion (OTEC) is one potenOal domesOc technology that may warrant invesOgaOon as part of Fiji's broader energy planning. Fiji's geographic and oceanographic characterisOcs may provide condiOons relevant to OTEC, including access to deep-ocean water relaOvely close to its islands and warm surface-water condiOons throughout the year.

Recommenda6on 7

Declaration of interest

OceanBit APAC has a commercial interest in ocean-energy technology, however, the recommendaOons in this submission are nevertheless intended to be technology-neutral. These recommendaOons do not seek a commitment to deploy OTEC or to designate it as a preferred technology within Fiji's energy mix. The submission instead supports the inclusion of energy-security and energy-transiOon within the Vuvale Union's implementaOon framework and proposes an independent naOonal ocean-energy resource assessment, as an expansion to previous governmental research programs providing a greater wealth of informaOon for Fiji's evidence base.

Conclusion

The Fiji–Australia Vuvale Union provides an important framework for strengthening the resilience, security and prosperity of both countries. Its commitments to net-zero economic transformaOon, climate security and the protecOon of criOcal infrastructure provide a clear basis for energy-security to be considered as part of the Union's pracOcal implementaOon.

Reliable and resilient electricity is fundamental to Fiji's economic development, essenOal services and naOonal security. The implementaOon of the Vuvale Union should therefore provide a clear and technology-neutral framework for cooperaOon on energy-security and energy-transiOon, while preserving Fiji's authority to determine its own energy prioriOes and investment decisions.

Within this broader framework, an independent naOonal assessment of Fiji's ocean-energy resources would provide a proporOonate opportunity to strengthen the evidence available to Fiji. It would not predetermine the role of ocean energy but would provide informaOon that could support future decisions about energy generaOon, as well as wider marine planning and naOonal resilience.

The submi[er therefore encourages the Commi[ee to consider how the Vuvale Union Work Plan can give pracOcal effect to the Treaty's commitments relaOng to energy-security, criOcal infrastructure, climate resilience and net-zero transformaOon, while ensuring that Fiji retains ownership of its energy choices and the evidence required to make them.

Kind regards,

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Pacific Polytech

Pacific Polytech

Submission on Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union to Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

Introduction

The Fiji-Australia Vuvale Union was signed in July 2026, by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka outlining commitments to deepen economic and human development partnership. It also outlines key commitments for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and skills development across the Pacific.

The core TVET and skills commitments includes;

1. TVET Regional Centre of Excellence whereby the union proposes establishing a digital skills-focused TVET Regional Centre of Excellence, with a potential second center dedicated to maritime skills.
2. Vuvale Skills Hub & Suva Hubs for digital transformation, Australia and Fiji launched the refurbished Vuvale Skills Hub in Suva (Walu Bay) to support local workforce training and the digital economy.
3. Maritime & Ship Repair by collaborating with Australian training partners to develop Fiji into a regional ship maintenance and repair hub.
4. Subsidised Higher Education Pathways whereby the treaty introduces provisions for subsidised, domestic-rate university placements in Australia for selected Fijian students, scheduled to roll out around 2029 or 2030.
5. Broader Skills Alignment which complements existing frameworks like the Pacific Australia Skills programme and the Australia-Fiji Education Programme.

Current status

The 2026–2027 National Budget allocated $883.3 million to the education sector to provide quality education for every Fijian. This includes support to student assistance programme, early childhood education, free education grant, providing funding for teacher salaries, Technical & Vocational Education and Training (TVET), school infrastructure and Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service (TSLS).

These initiatives targeting to address the skills gaps are commendable. The inability to replenish the industry with competent graduates is ever increasing and this concerted effort provides a platform to address this issue. While welcoming these initiatives in areas of TVET, a stock take of existing institutions and its roles in providing TVET training is much needed.

Pacific Polytech's position is that the core TVET commitments are far short of what is needed in Fiji, and would effectively consume most of the funds in areas which wont address skills gap in Fiji.
proposals in the is one of these TVET institution which confidently advocates the ability the provide competent graduates to the industries.

Submission

Recent studies done on skill gaps in Fiji all indicate massive gaps, and all call for massive investments in TVET sector.

Submission 1: Vuvale commitments must address the matters contained in the studies done on skill gaps. This includes massive funding for TVET sector

Submission 1b: If the owners of the funds do not accept the findings of the reports done, then as a high priority, they must fund their own full study on Skill shortage in Fiji, and make the fundings public.

Our assessment is that there are, inter alia, 3 major causes of Skill Shortage in Fiji:

1. Declining real public sector support for skill development and training in Fiji
2. Declining interest of students in Skill Development (a result of treating TVET as a s8ideline endeavour), and
3. Massive migration of skills, with a vast majority to Australia

Submission 2: Australia need to fund the full training costs of producing each skilled person who it "takes". Our assessment is that in 2025 those who migrates to Australia cost over $1.2b of Fijian taxpayer funds. This money must be provided by Australia to Fiji for funding skill development, education, health and all that which is taken to produce skills. This is an annual sum.

Submission 3: There must be clear direct funding of students who opt for TVET and Skill development in Fiji. This must be outside the TSLS scheme, as TSLS has become highly politicised over the last year, responding not to the needs of Fiji, but the interests of politicians.

Our assessment is that Fiji needs at least 8,000 new trades and technical graduates each year to maintain the Fijian economy at the present level. Fiji produces less than 50% of what is needed. Australian has spent hundreds of millions in an initiative it implemented known as APTC. A cost-benefit analysis of the APTC would confirm that this initiative was a miserable failure.

Submission 4: Australia needs to ensure that the Skill development initiative in Fiji is directly driven by the main stakeholders in Fiji. An Australian led and driven initiative will again, like APTC, fail to deliver what is needed.

Recommendations

In a genuine spirit of Vuvale, the Pacific Polytech has made these 4 submissions. If there is a need for detailed discussion on these, we would be happy to oblige.

END