

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

FRIDAY, 19TH APRIL, 2024

[CORRECTED COPY]

CONTENTS

	<u>Pages</u>
Minutes	571
Communications from the Speaker	571
(1) Welcome	
(2) USP Law Students	
Presentation of Papers & Certain Documents	572
Questions	572-591
<u>Oral Questions</u>	
(1) Redemption of Student Bus Cards (Q/No. 39/2024)	
(2) Fiji Public Sector Learning Institute (Q/No. 40/2024)	
(3) Status of the Seaweed Programme (Q/No. 41/2024)	
(4) Budget Implementation-Disaster Operations (Q/No. 42/2024)	
(5) Plans for Upskilling Individuals (Q/No. 43/2024)	
(6) Fire Report – Vatuwaqa Primary School (Q/No. 45/2024)	
End of Week Statements	591-609
(1) Farmers’ Perspective on the Dairy Sector – Hon. S. Nand	
(2) Cost of Living in Fiji Today – Hon. J. Usamate	
(3) Fiji Air Services Agreement – Hon. A.V.B.C. Bainivalu	
(4) Challenge of Drugs and Substance Abuse – Hon. I. Vanawalu	
Suspension of Standing Orders	596
Adjournment	609-610

FRIDAY, 19TH APRIL, 2024

The Parliament met at 9.45 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications; the honourable A. Bia; the honourable S.S. Kirpal; and the honourable V. Nath.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Thursday, 18th April, 2024, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to this final sitting for the week and also those joining us in the gallery and those watching the proceedings on television and the internet. Thank you for your continued interest in the proceedings of Parliament.

USP Law Students

Honourable Members, please join me in welcoming the law students from the University of the South Pacific. Welcome to your Parliament and whilst Friday's proceedings are usually short, I hope that you will have an appreciation of the mechanics of Parliament proceedings. This is about the second incoming batches to attend the sittings and we are so humbly proud of your presence here because at times we do not know whether there is interest in the workings of Parliament or not.

People place less importance in the proceedings of Parliament, but this is where, let me remind you, you may have been taught this, this is where they make laws, this is where they repeal the laws, and this is where they amend the laws of the country. It is a very important duty that the honourable Members here are charged to be responsible with and answer back to the people who voted them in.

This is the people's House, this august Parliament, and we wish you well in your stay here with us. Learn as much as possible when you are here with us. Only learn the good things, not the bad things. The bad things you leave behind in Parliament. I am supposed to welcome another gentleman, but he is not here, and that is alright.

PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND CERTAIN DOCUMENTS

The following Reports were tabled by honourable Ministers responsible, in accordance with Standing Order 38(1), and referred to relevant Standing Committees for deliberation in accordance with Standing Order 38(2):

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji - Audit Report on Follow Up of High Risk Ministries and Departments (*Parliamentary Paper No. 41 of 2024*).

Standing Committee on Natural Resources

Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources – Annual Report 2021-2022 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 42 of 2024*)

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Redemption of Student Bus Cards
(Question No. 39/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Tourism and Civil Aviation update Parliament on the status of the redemption of student bus cards?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Parliament has changed all for the better. In the past, if a questioner was not here, the question was not asked. So, thank you, Sir, for the new rules in Parliament that allows Parliament to operate as it should be in a democracy.

The Ministry of Education has data that 63,454 out of the 77,539 students have successfully redeemed their subsidised cards for Term 1 2024, inclusive of 2023 eligible students. The public was informed accordingly regarding the redeeming of subsidised cards for Term 1 2024, via a Press Release on 15th January, 2024. The data given above is from the eligible families whose combined household income is below \$16,000 per annum.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a process that is involved in all these, and as highlighted, about 18 percent of the students have not redeemed their cards. There is a process in place which says, and I quote:

“Parents and guardians must ensure that the transport assistance application form are submitted at school. Head of School assesses the application and update verified application into Fiji Education Management Information System (FEMIS).

The Head of School will verify the status of the application in FEMIS. Headquarters staff extract the transport assistance data of students that have applied and send it to Vodafone Fiji to provide the student recent card number and balance.

Headquarters staff calculate the fare from the families’ data and end balance from Vodafone Fiji to upload the funds to the subsidised cards to cater for them for the school term. Students redeem their subsidised cards at the redeeming centres.”

Some of the reasons, Mr. Speaker, Sir, why there is non-redeeming of cards by 18 percent is that the non-verification of student application in FEMIS is factoring this. An area of concern is the change of card due to loss or damage. However, the new card number information is not submitted to headquarters who, in turn, are unable to submit it to Vodafone for loading of funds. This is a critical area. Sir. The new card will not work if the process is not observed about the lost and damaged card.

We also had 2023 subsidised card holders who have not applied for the assistance of this academic year 2024. They may have balances from 2023 and used it all at the beginning of the year, but because they have not applied for the new academic year, the card is not topped up. Then the card has zero balance, students can no longer use it. Then they or their parents realise and then they try to get new cards and re-apply. The verification and lodging of the new application will depend on our schedules of payments with Vodafone. Also, multiple tapping of subsidised cards for other students and utilising the funds intended for a term are more rapid.

We, in the Ministry, are taking mitigation plans. Our continuous reminders are being sent out to Education District Offices and schools for eligible students to apply for the assistance. Replacement cards are being updated in the FEMIS, District Offices are being informed accordingly, and new card numbers are loaded with funds. Head of Schools to verify the 3,024 applications not verified, in FEMIS. We are also looking at the introduction of Vodafone Point of Sale terminal for the redemption of subsidised and non-subsidised cards in other outlets, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

On the action plans, new students' application cards are registered and sent to schools. Change of cards are submitted from the District Offices and funds are loaded accordingly. Head of Schools remind parents and guardians to apply for the assistance. Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is for those whose family income is under \$16,000.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also looking at Point of Sales in schools, as opposed to what we currently have, to help rectify this. Let me just say that the system has been in place since 2018. We started off with 56,728 students, and at the end of 2023 and into 2024, there are now 71,203 students who are now using the e-ticketing system. So, it has been there, it is growing by the day, but there are processes that need to be observed which is affecting the full implementation of the scheme. But be assured that we are working towards ensuring that everyone has access to this. It is mostly operational, and assistance is forthcoming from the Ministry to ensure that everyone benefits.

HON. H. CHAND.- A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Transport Assistance Scheme for students was introduced by the previous Government to ensure that no child is left behind and students do not drop out of schools. Recently, many parents and students have expressed concerns over their failure to redeem student bus cards eight weeks into the term. Can the honourable Minister for Education inform Parliament on the reasons behind that disarray, how the Ministry will compensate the parents, and the strategies to ensure that is not repeated in future? According to the honourable Minister, thousands of students were affected.

HON.V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Members of the Parliament and the people of this country, there is no disarray.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a process. As I have said, 82 percent of the students are benefiting already. The Heads of School, parents and students who are not benefitting from this, is due to the process not being observed, and we are taking steps to mitigate this. There will be POS now in schools and there is back up every day. There will be reminders

everyday. This is a system that has been here since 2018 and these are recurring problems. When I listen to my people and the way they present this to me, they are very experienced people. They know what is happening and it is amazing how they are controlling this, but like I always say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it takes two to tango.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- The Ministry of Education is doing its work, the parents and the students do their job and everyone will be cosy in this country in terms of this, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- That sounds good; it takes two?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the problem with that side of Parliament is, they can make the announcements during budget, “We are helping the parents, we are helping the State, we are helping everyone”, but the implementation is so poor...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- ...and that is an example of poor implementation. It is called “implementation deficit”. The question to the honourable Minister is, when are you going to use all these money? Why are you keeping that money for the last eight weeks, while parents are forking out money from their pockets? Is that fair to the parents?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker Sir, if we can all cooperate to educate the parents and the students on how to do it, instead of going around spreading lies, we can all be happy about this.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- There is funding there! There is money there. We also play a role here. There is money there...

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Where is the money?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- ... and it is public funds. There is a process in place, and as I have said, 82 percent are already benefitting, the 18 percent need our help to try and get them to do the right thing and the Opposition can help instead of telling other stories.

HON. T.R. MATASAWALEVU.- Honourable Deputy Prime Minister Gavoka, in my area in the border between Ra and Wainibuka, down to Northland, the Licensed Carrier (LC) operators have not been fully paid for 12 weeks now. Does your Ministry have the funds, and if so, when will full payment be made to them?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Poor performance.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are about 615 Road Service Licence (RSL) providers in the country, about more than 600, and there is a process in place. Let me read this out, and I quote:

“The following payment process is followed by transport providers. The RSL summarizes, and the vouchers are submitted by the transport provider to the District Officer. The District Transport Assistant Officer counts the vouchers and verifies the RSL voucher summary is correctly filled as per the checklist. Once the verification is complete and the checklist filled, the relevant documents are submitted to Headquarters. Headquarters verifies the summary before HMS input and further processing, and within three to five days we make payments.”

You submit the correct summary, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Within three to five days, it is paid.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- The question is, why are there delays?

As I have said, there are 615 RSL providers in the nine Education Districts. Non-compliance by RSL providers often lead to delay in payment - RSL voucher summary being incorrectly filled, checklist accompanying the summary being incorrectly filled, the requirements of the checklist not being met, so for any errors or incompleteness discovered at Headquarters for any of the summaries received, the summaries are reverted to the District Office. So, that is where the delay is. You do it right at that point, you get your money within three days or five days.

That is it, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and we are doing what we can to educate them. So, again, I say – it takes two to play this – them the RSL people, the Ministry of Education, and if the summary is right, within three or five days, you get paid.

Fiji Public Sector Learning Institute
(Question No. 40/2024)

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs update Parliament on the establishment of the Fiji Public Sector Learning Institute (FPSLI)?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also join you in welcoming the students who are here with us this morning. I thank you, Sir, for allowing me to be a little late and have my question deferred to the next Sitting, but I tried to be back in time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was at the funeral service for the late Apisalome Tudreu, a long serving civil servant of Fiji and a product of the training systems and processes that were in place during his time as a civil servant.

To answer the honourable Assistant Minister’s question, Cabinet approved the establishment of the Fiji Public Sector Learning Institute (FPSLI) earlier this year on 19th March, 2024. By that time, we were well into the process of serving out the budget of the year, and the establishment of the FPSLI which will ensure the Fiji public sector as a skilled and experienced workforce needed to build a strong future for our nation. The Institute, delivering high quality work and relevant learning programmes using timely and cost-efficient approach, will support the realisation of Government priorities and improve service delivery to the community and businesses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the training will cover the following: service examination; customer service; ethics and code of conduct; quality circles; project management and monitoring; various policies and

initiatives introduced in the Civil Service, finance and non-finance officers, government legislations, governance and leadership, public administration and management; human resources management; and local government administration and management, et cetera. The Institute will also provide high quality specialised courses for Fiji's Foreign Service officers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it will be a centre of excellence for sharing best practices in modern diplomacy. Through the Vuvale Partnership with the Australian Government, support is being confirmed through various training providers including the Australian Diplomatic Academy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Institute will also help in creating a learning organisation, separate from the Civil Service, that will eventually build a reputation for quality learning and be accepted as a provider of choice by the Civil Service and the business community. And I refer to the late Apisalome Tudreu, who grew up in the Civil Service using the various stages of training provided by Public Service Commission of his time.

In the future, it is intended that fee-for-service programmes will also be provided or offered to other organisations outside of the public sector, also in the Pacific, especially the Small Island States. The budget will be implemented as part of the 2024-2025 Budget and the Cabinet approval was received toward into this Budget year. Work programmes will also be initiated.

It is envisaged that an amount of \$1.3 million would be sought for operational and capital expenditure. The timeframe for the Institute to be implemented will be in three stages, including the:

- design phase;
- preparation of the physical classroom and centre; and
- various MOUs with partner institutes in the region.

Stage one, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the establishment of the Institute involves enlisting the expertise of qualified consulting services to provide guidance and support to the Ministry of Civil Service in establishing and developing the FPSLI. The consulting team will work closely with Government stakeholders to design the Institute's structure, develop its curriculum, and establish key partnerships to ensure its success.

A Terms of Reference for a consultancy service to investigate the establishment of FPSLI will be advertised this week. The following deliverables for the consulting firm are:

- Research and scope of the establishment of FPSLI.
- Development of FPSLI's strategic plan, including vision, mission, goal and structure.
- Design and develop comprehensive curriculum framework and course materials aligned with FPSLI's objectives.
- Facilitation of accreditation and registration processes with relevant authorities.
- Implementation and management of IT services, including website development, Learning Management Systems (LMS) setup and review and revamp of the current Moodle Platform and Training Packages.
- Delivery of training programmes to upskill current MCS, including how to write training packages for online platforms.

Stage 2, Mr. Speaker, Sir, involves improving the physical training and learning facilities to support face to face learning and provide allocation for the Institute to operate as a recognised institute.

The refurbishment of the Government Training Centre in Nasese will include scoping in 2024, source funding 2024-2025 and completion in 2025-2026. The budget of \$1 million is requested under Head 50 for OAHU.

The MOUs, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the Somare Institute of Leadership and Governance and the Vanuatu Institute of Public Administration and Management have been developed and submitted for endorsement. The MOUs seek to explore opportunities for jointly extending learning services provided by these similar institutes in Australia, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, and provide roles in Fiji, including participation in experience sharing and institutional building activities.

With regards to the nature and legal status of the FPSLI, there will be consultations with the Office of the Solicitor-General to determine this.

Before I resume my seat, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have allowed the Civil Servants today to take half a day off and support our rugby teams either at the ground or on television.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I also wish to pay tribute to the late Mr. Apisalome Tudreu. We, the old students of Ratu Kadavulevu School, presented our *reguregu* there yesterday. He was at RKS from the late 1970s to mostly 1980s. Of course, Vice-President of the Methodist Church of Fiji. He was a civil servant, he contributed a lot and we do remember him and our condolences to Eka and the family.

My simple question to the honourable Prime Minister Sir, is about Fiji Public Sector Learning Institute (FPSLI) as being a recognised institute. This is going to deal mainly with adult training and one of the key aspects of adult training is what we call Recognition of Current Competencies (RCC) and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). My simple question to the honourable Minister is, how is FPSLI preparing or prepared for this?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Leader of the Opposition knows there are entry requirements which are perused by the selection panels and there are also competency assessments carried out by the various departments. Those all account towards a clear progression of a civil servant and also towards a non-recommendation of a civil servant to continue their training in the Institute.

As we enjoy this afternoon's match, I hope we will be mindful of those who continue to serve in the police services, fire services and military services of our country - those who will not be able to come and watch the game with us.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just along the same lines of the question that was asked by the honourable Leader of the Opposition, one of the things that we find in a lot of Ministries is that there are people that have the competency to be able to do things. They have proven it in the way that they can write, and they can do things but because they do not have the same academic qualifications than others and not recognised as such. So, my question is – is there a possibility of ticking off the competencies that they already have, so that when they fit into a programme, they do not have to go and re-do what they are already able to do.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Cross credit.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Cross crediting, that is what we mean by Recognition of Current Competencies (RCC), so instead of having to do the whole programme, you will just have to do the portion to plug the gaps.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, for some time now, I have been asking the office to try and reduce the size of the submission, paperwork required that they send up for my final approval for the final 'yes' or 'no', to the filling of some civil service positions.

Sir, there is a lot of that being done right now but it is all on paper and I have asked the Service to reduce the paperwork. As you have heard, we are trying to have a lot of interaction with the computer, have a portal ready and available, as well as the starting point of the Open Merit Recruitment System (OMRS).

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Prime Minister for coming up with such initiative. I am just trying to get some clarity, Mr. Speaker.

The Government has actually funded Pacific Polytech with a couple of million dollars. Now, we are actually forming a new institute. For clarification, why can we not use Pacific Polytech to provide the same training because the honourable Prime Minister is asking for another million dollars to establish this institute? Having funded a particular institute, why can that institute not be used to provide this training?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member, but there was a distinct difference between what is provided for under Pacific Polytech and also in-service training and progression as will be covered by the Institute.

Status of the Seaweed Programme
(Question No. 41/2024)

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

With the seaweed farming having huge potential in coastal communities and maritime islands, can the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry inform Parliament on the current status of the Seaweed Programme?

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before responding to the Oral Question this morning, please, allow me to clarify the issue highlighted in the *Fiji Sun* today, indicating the non-clarity of my statement yesterday.

The *Fiji Sun* indicated that I spoke about the assessment of net emissions under the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF).

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Yet, the statement by the honourable Minister, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was actually providing some clear information on the REDD+ and FCPF arrangements, with the Government detailing the work that has been carried out so far and where that works is currently placed at, as of this week.

A written statement clarifying how the statements for the net emission under the FCPF Programme, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will be presented for the information of this august Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to respond to the question and I thank the honourable Member for his question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the farming of seaweed was initiated under the Commodity Development

Framework Project in the 1980s. It is a low-tech process, well suited to the lifestyle of rural coastal communities.

Echeuma seaweed has already been technically feasible in Fiji. Seaweed farming has proven to be a stable income source with proven health benefits and alternative food source. Its universal appeal is evident as it flourishes across the Northern, Central, Western and Eastern Divisions, establishing clusters in various locations, like Lakeba, Nakalou, Dama, Sasa and Dakuniba in the Northern Division. It is providing economic security to coastal communities, women and youth groups alike.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, although the commodity is well developed and ready for large scale commercialisation, until now the industry has not reached the level it was anticipated to reach. Seaweed farming has slowed momentum over the last three years with productions volumes dropping from an annual volume of 200 tonnes down to 85 tonnes.

Market prices has always been a major challenge in seaweed farming. It must be sufficient to maintain grower interest, compared with returns to competing rural income sources, like fishing, copra, *dalo*, *yaqona*, to name a few.

The Coalition Government is here to change that. The unwavering commitment by the Coalition Government towards the Seaweed Programme is evident through the increased allocation of \$330,000 for the 2023–2024 fiscal year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a major turnaround made by the Ministry which aims to bring us back to where the seaweed industry needs to be. This will allow investors to partner with Government through the funding setup of seaweed farms and market accessibility. The Ministry will, in turn, provide suitable extension and advisory services for the 10 viable communities to considerably supply to this market.

This partnership will also improve the seaweed farming pricing and payment structure. Communities will be able to make an arrangement with the investors on agreed buying price and this establishes quality standards and seaweed operating procedures for market needs.

The Ministry has been instrumental in augmenting value addition and expanding market reach. Through strategic partnerships with other Ministries, we aim to unlock new avenues for growth and sustainability, paving the way for a brighter future.

Looking ahead, our vision is ambitious, yet attainable. We aspire to produce 500 metric tonnes of seaweed annually within the next three years, engaging communities beginning with the Northern Division, expanding to other Divisions. By 2029, our goal is to involve 60 percent of coastal communities in seaweed farming, fostering inclusive economic development with an approximate return to community project owners of \$1.2 million annually.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government believes partnership with investors and the establishment of seaweed farmers' cooperative will help to ensure the sustainability of the project.

One of the major aspects the Ministry believes it could enhance further, is to develop a strategic approach in handling over the commodity setup to investors and support community development programmes.

In April last year, Cabinet approved the Ministry's proposal for the adjustment to the current farming arrangement of seaweed to cater for the growing market demand. This underscores our

dedication to the growth and success of this initiative. Our proposed strategy for mass production and integration underscores our dedication to improving efficiency and ensuring economic prosperity for all stakeholders involved.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry, for the first time ever, has signed a Public Private Partnership with a private entity, Soluk Island Fresh Company Limited. This strategic partnership aims to establish a community-based seaweed farming collaboration for sustainable ocean management.

Through this partnership, we will work together to promote eco-friendly and modern seaweed cultivation practices, creating new economic opportunities while preserving marine ecosystems. By leveraging the collective expertise and resources, food security will be enhanced, climate change mitigated, and socio-economic development fostered in targeted seaweed farming communities.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Minister. That was quite a mouthful too.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can understand that the global seaweed market has a forecasted value of \$14.6 billion by 2031, and the 2023-2024 National Budget has allocated \$330,000. So, with this new allocation and knowing that the climate is one of the major issues, with the seaweeds being planted in shallow areas, with this \$330,000 allocation, what innovative approach has the Ministry taken to mitigate these challenges for the farmers? Mr. Speaker, Sir, part two of that is, if there is an issue of accessing to finance, you have mentioned about partnerships, what are the multilateral and multisectoral participatory collaborations your Ministry is endorsing to boost these assistance and initiatives.?

MR. SPEAKER.- Would you like to answer that question because you have covered the first answer quite well?

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question is quite simple. After giving us all the figures with respect to what is happening within the seaweed programme, what have you done to educate or otherwise, the community that does this seaweed farming with respect to value adding?

MR. SPEAKER.- Before you reply, honourable Minister, remember the initial question was raised by honourable Niudamu. Are you doing seaweed farming up there in the hills? You can reply to that question.

(Laughter)

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. We are now starting with a new 360 degrees turnaround.

(Honourable Opposition Member interjects)

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Listen!

MR. SPEAKER.- Is that the new variety?

HON. K.V. RAVU.- It is not the new variety, Sir, it is the damage they do to the seaweed

industry. As I have mentioned in my statement, it has dropped from 200 tonnes to 85 tonnes, which means they are not producing for the last few years. So, we are trying to build up this industry before doing training into value adding. First, we need to start farming before we go into other things.

HON. V. LAL.- My supplementary question is similar to what honourable Rinesh Sharma asked. The honourable Minister has just informed that there is increased budgetary allocation to the seaweed programme and despite that, there is a huge reduction in the production. So, why so? My question is when there is increased budgetary allocation, the production should increase. Is it due to the other factors? What are the other factors?

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a lot of research done during this period. We need to shift into various places that are suitable for seaweed farming. They have not been doing that in the previous years. So, we need to go further, we need to do research on that. Thank you.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, seaweed farming is we farm and we sell it a raw product. There is an option. If we set up a factory or facility just to extract the carrageenan which is extracted from seaweed and is used in packed tinned product. Canned meat, you have carrageenan in there. If we go that way, set up that facility, maybe that will entice more people to go into farming and then we can export the carrageenan which will bring in higher value. Has there been in discussions along those lines?

HON. K.V. RAVU.- As I have mentioned earlier, once we have the stock the investors will come and they will establish that for that purpose.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Members. The reply from the honourable Minister is very clear. They are setting up the stock and then the investors will come running. So, we will take it at that and leave it at that as well.

(Laughter)

Budget Implementation – Disaster Operations
(Question No. 42/2024)

HON. I. TUIWAILEVU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management update Parliament on how it has progressed with budget implementation, concurrently with managing disaster operations during the course of the current financial year?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; I am pleased to provide a response on how the Ministry has progressed with its budget implementation and I thank the honourable Member for the question.

Whilst it continues to manage disaster operations during the course of this financial year. The Ministry strives to do its best in achieving its core responsibilities, that is, both the coordination and facilitation of rural development and managing disaster operations in its season.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the average results of 93 percent budget utilisation during the last three years when the nation faced multiple hazards, namely Category 4 *TC Harold*, Category 5 *TC Yasa*, Category 2 *TC Ana* and in the midst of COVID-19, is a testament of the Ministry's commitment to

diligently serve its people.

I have continuously informed and updated Parliament on the vulnerabilities that our nation is exposed to that has made extreme weather events a constant threat to our development gains. This historical perspective not only sheds light on the challenges faced by the country but also underscores the importance of proactive measures in safeguarding the lives and livelihoods of its people.

Environmental hazards including cyclones, floods, earthquakes and tsunamis have, over the years, brought about devastating consequences, prompting the Government to prioritise disaster preparedness and mitigation efforts. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the Adoption of Global and Regional Agendas and Mechanisms, Fiji has tailor-made the Disaster Risk Reduction Initiatives so that our development is risk informed and sustainable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I stand here today, the various communities of practice on Disaster Risk Reduction continues to churn our literature, programmes, initiatives and policies, all racing against time to ensure that the Globe, including Fiji, achieves the Sustainable Development Goals within agreed timeframes. While implementing them in-country to some extent, as reduced disaster risk, there still remains a level of risk for financial investments towards our public sector development programmes.

As Minister responsible for Disaster Management, I have been entrusted the task of mainstreaming disaster risk reduction into all aspects of development for our community, as well as Government as a whole, and within this enormous task lies the responsibility of ensuring sufficient financial investments to manage the existing risks through mitigation preparedness, response and recovery efforts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to shed some light to Parliament of the Ministry's overall budget utilisation rate in the recent past three financial years, as follows:

- in 2020-2021, 87 percent utilisation rate on the budget allocation of \$16.6 million;
- in 2021-2022, 96 percent budget utilisation rate from the budget allocation of \$14.5 million; and
- year 2022-2023, 97 percent utilisation rate on the budget allocation of \$15 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these achievements were realised in the same period where Fiji experienced *TC Tino*, *TC Herald* and *TC Yasa* in 2020 to 2021 and 2022 to 2023 with *TC Harold*, *TC Ana*, *TC Cody* and *TC Mal*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite those achievements, I would like to state that the Ministry has had its fair share of staff retention challenges in the recent years, sometimes Government takes for granted. This is mostly in the forms of previous Government's lack of appreciation and compensation of the staffing ability to work long hours with little to know benefits provided any disaster management operation, despite the assistance of our key line Ministries.

As most civil servants usually take rest during any disaster, our Ministry staff are usually engaged full time for this purpose, to ensure timely response and recovery for the people of Fiji. As a result, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our staff resignations have increased from 2 percent to 5 percent in these three financial years. In the year 2020-2021, it was 2.4 percent; 2021-2022, it was 5.21 percent; and 2022-2023, it was 5.46 percent.

Staff resignation was mainly due to better offers from other line Ministries, including regional organisations that offered much better salaries and benefits to our staff because of the nature of work

they undertake in the Ministry. For the current financial year, the resignation rate has already reached 3.82 percent and we are confident that the removal of short-term contracts by this Government will bring some sense of security to our staff and civil servants as a whole. On a positive note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry acknowledges the dedication and commitment of the remaining staff who have decided to continuously serve the people of Fiji, despite all the challenges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry had been allocated a total budget of \$29 million for the current financial year (2023-2024). Out of this, \$15 million is the operating budget, of which about 51 percent has been utilised. Our personnel costs budget is about 51 percent of the total operating budget, and the Ministry has utilised 67 percent of its budgeted personnel costs. Combined expenditures for the other five Standard Expenditure Groups have reached only about 35 percent. Out of the \$13 million capital budget, 85 percent or \$11 million has been released to the Ministry and overall, 48 percent of this has been committed.

However, I would like to note that budget utilisation for a number of capital development projects have exceeded 80 percent commitment. Those are:

1. Community Access Roads, Footpaths and Footbridges (CARFF) Programme where 85 percent of its \$2 million budget has been released to the Ministry, of which 88 percent is now committed.
2. Self-Help Programme where 100 percent of its \$1 million budget has been released to the Ministry, of which 87 percent is now committed.
3. High Risk Water and Sanitation Programme, where 100 percent of its \$0.8 million budget has been released, of which 84 percent is now committed.
4. Seafaring Entrepreneurial Assistance Scheme where 100 percent of this \$0.5 million budget has been released to the Ministry, of which 82 percent is now committed.
5. Upgrading of Staff Quarters Programme where 50 percent of its \$1 million budget has been released to the Ministry, of which 83 percent is now committed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as this august Parliament is fully aware, the Ministry was assigned three new Capital Development Programmes in this financial year, and they are the:

1. Rural Housing Assistance Programme;
2. Rural and Outer Island Development Programme; and
3. Seafaring Entrepreneurial Assistance (SEA) Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the SEA Programme is a relatively easier one to implement as it only requires procurement of boat and engine from approved tender suppliers, hence utilisation rate is now above 80 percent.

The Rural Housing Assistance (RHA) Scheme and Rural and Outer Island Programme (ROI) requires more work, including the tender process for machineries to be procured or hired under ROI, and finalisation of plans and housing materials for RHA, let alone finetuning guidelines for implementation. I believe that will answer a lot of the questions from honourable Premila Kumar, who was asking about the number of houses we have completed up to now. I must highlight that the Ministry was able to recruit the required personnel for these Programmes in the past three months, which has greatly assisted in progressing with the administrative works required for the programme implementation.

For RHA Programme, I have already provided an update in my earlier response on Wednesday whereas for the ROI Programme, the Ministry is now successfully completing all the necessary Tender Board approval processes which should be progressing with procurement and

service delivery in the next two or three months. I note that the tenders, once awarded, will be valid for three years, which means for the new financial year, the Ministry should be ready to implement in the first quarter, once development projects have been identified.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in November 2023, the Fiji Meteorological Services provided the 2023-2024 Cyclone Season Outlook, forecasting two to three tropical cyclones which are likely to pass through Fiji's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) during the 2023-2024 tropical cyclone season. Even while Fiji was impacted by Category 2 *TC Mal*, the intense rainfall brought about by rainbands has impacted parts of our country with flash floods and riverine flooding in the month of November, mainly impacting the Wainadoti area and recent March floods heavily impacting the Central, Western and Northern Divisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the cost of responding to *TC Mal* was \$212,000, catering for fuel to support operations and initial damage assessments, the charter of vessels, procurement of food ration for evacuees, and communication, support and subsistence allowance for the officers manning our emergency operations centres.

Whilst the investment of the Fiji Government is acknowledged, it would be remiss of me not to mention the critical support provided by our partners in the region, particularly the Governments of New Zealand and Australia, who have always provided disaster response support in both cash and kind, in particular, the humanitarian emergency relief supplies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must acknowledge the work of the Ministry staff in trying to press on with its two core roles through a 12-month period. One new programme that has been assigned to the Ministry is the co-ordination for relocation as per the Standard Operating Procedure for Planned Relocation Guidelines. I have already informed Parliament earlier this week about the progress on the relocation of the Nabavatu Village. We are working with existing resources and agencies to co-ordinate this project with other agencies of the Government. The Ministry has already made its submission to the Ministry of Finance for the establishment of a new Relocation Unit as per the Planned Relocation Guideline.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all the Divisions of the Ministry worked together during cyclone and non-cyclone season to achieve its planned activities. Of course, when it comes to saving lives, development work will be secondary. I must say that it is not always an easy journey for the staff as they know that their deliverables for those two core roles still have to be achieved, and I commend them for their passion and dedication.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, like many of the Ministries, we are also working on reviewing our 10-year (2021-2031) Strategic Development Plan. Obviously, we will have to align to the new Strategic Development Plan, and we are mindful of the review of the Fijian Administration which may have some impact on how the Ministry provides its service to the people of Fiji. Nevertheless, the Ministry is also working on improving its employee satisfaction and retention strategy through ongoing training and re-training opportunities that would be ready for any inevitable change that may come our way in the foreseeable future, including mitigation efforts for our staff turnover.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, SDG17 on Partnership for the Goals stands as a guiding principle in our pursuit of sustainable development and disaster management and rural development which underscores imperative cooperation and partnerships in our collective endeavour. By emphasising the significance of multi-stakeholder partnerships, capacity building and resource mobilisation, we affirm our shared obligation to address global challenges including disaster risk reduction and resilience in developments.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the worst disasters that we had was the flooding that happened in the village of Cogeia. Cogeia is a place where two rivers converge, and I was actually in that village to see it flooded, homes filled with mud and completely destroyed. We were also part of the programme of trying to relocate the village, and we were there at the ground break. I just would like to know if the honourable Minister might give us some update on how far that has progressed - the relocation of Cogeia Village to the new site?

HON. S.D. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the moment, the Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS) has taken lead role in the Cogeia relocation, and we have given her our assurance and commitment to see what she can be assisted with from the Government. At the moment, I believe there is a German NGO, I think it is Brot fur die Welt, that is financing for that. Sir, FCOSS has taken lead on that, but we are also providing oversight, and if there is any assistance that they need, we will provide that when they need it.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question to the honourable Minister is on the Rural and Outer Island (ROI) Programme. Sir, ROI as you are aware, honourable Minister, was with the Ministry of Agriculture. You have just stated in your statement that there are still a lot of projects, or whatever it is, that is still undergoing the tender process. My question is, there was a purpose behind ROI when it was in the Ministry of Agriculture, what has changed that the programme has now been shifted to the Ministry of Rural Development in terms of the purposes in which it was established, and the type of projects undertaken when ROI was with the Ministry of Agriculture? So, what is the main difference now when that has been transferred to your Ministry?

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, before you reply could you just explain what ROI stands for?

HON. S.D. DITOKA.- It is the Rural and Outer Island Development Programme. I believe that it is aligned with what the Coalition Government has decided to focus on, which is to give all the core agricultural aspects of the Ministry of Agriculture's work to them and the development of the rural areas which, sometimes in some areas, they overlap with each other, and it is that overlap area that we have decided to focus the development work on ROI.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, there being no further supplementary questions, I intend to adjourn Parliament now for tea and we will resume when the bell is sounded.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.51 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.24 a.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- We shall move on and before we proceed, honourable Members I would like to acknowledge the presence in the gallery of His Excellency the Australian High Commissioner, honourable Ewen McDonald. Thank you so much for being with us this morning, Sir. It is a very important occasion for us especially when we were preparing for this afternoon, the Drua. They are becoming rugby crazy as well.

(Acclamation)

Plans for Upskilling Individuals
(Question No. 43/2024)

HON. J. USAMATE asked the Government, upon notice:

Considering the skilled labour shortage due to many workers leaving Fiji, can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Tourism and Civil Aviation inform Parliament on any plans to quickly upskill individuals to fill the vacancies in the tourism industry?

MR. SPEAKER.- I would just like to recap what the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Tourism and Civil Aviation said earlier on. Strictly speaking, the tradition in Parliament is, when a question is being proposed and the mover of the question is not present, then that lapses automatically. But, again, this time around, given that we are trying to build a very close relationship that we have and also to be mindful of the time taken in preparing questions, et cetera, especially from you, honourable Members, to our Tables and Committees Unit, it is a hell of a task being taken there to have them in this final form and after going through the Business Committee as well. So, I have taken it upon myself not to be so strict but to be lenient in the understanding that we can all enjoy this whilst the time is still here.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to address the question raised by honourable Koya regarding the plan to quickly upskill individuals to fill the vacancies in the tourism industry. The concern is the increasing exodus of social skilled workers from Fiji to overseas countries. Let me just, at the outset, Sir, say that the question is quite timely because the migration side of the story is well publicised while the education and training story is less known.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, firstly, I would like to acknowledge the remarkable resilience of the tourism industry. Despite the significant challenges brought by COVID-19 which led to a massive exodus of workers from the sector, many of whom transitioned to alternative careers or pursuing further education, the industry not only survived but is thriving. Visitor arrival and hotel occupancy rate is at its highest level which is a testimony of the flexibility and adaptability of the industry. We all know that 40 percent of GDP in this country is from tourism.

However, the increased departure of skilled professionals has underscored the pressing need for swift action to upskill and reskill workers and fill the resulting vacancies. I wish to highlight the proactive efforts of the Ministry of Education and the Higher Education Commission of Fiji in spearheading training, upskilling and reskilling initiative for both, unemployed and employed people, to take up jobs becoming vacant upon migration of the existing workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 4th January, 2024, a meeting was held at the Sheraton Hotel among the tourism stakeholders, Ministers and Ministry senior staff members to find solutions for increasing skill gaps in the industry due to the increased departure of skilled workers. The Director of Sheraton

Training Academy presented its industry-based interactive training method and offered to work with the Fiji National University (FNU) and other training providers in the country. A follow-up *talanoa* session was organised by the Higher Education Commission Fiji on 17th January, 2024, bringing together key stakeholders and higher education providers to discuss how they could work together and collectively address the skills gap problem. The dialogue and development of a new programme is underway.

I thank the Coalition Government for providing 1,800 grants for upskilling and reskilling unemployed youth in the country. Out of 1,800, 1,000 were allocated to the programmes of the tourism industry - 500 to mechanical courses and 300 to the construction industry. This grant award gave a second chance to the unfortunate people who missed out on education themselves because they could not afford it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a player that has recently entered into the field of education is Pacific Polytech. With the grant given to them, they have graduated about 824 students with competency-based certificates in various skillsets for the tourism and hospitality industry. This is an example of the service providers that are out there.

The Higher Education Commission Fiji has started to hold Career Expo last year (2023). It had one in Suva in October 2023 and in Lautoka in March 2024. It plans to hold one next month in Labasa. At the Careers Expo, Universities and Technical Institutions have their display booths and provide one stop platform to students and parents to understand the details of the qualifications they offer and respective job openings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the recent Lautoka Careers Expo, the topic, “New demand trends within Fiji’s tourism industry and skills required” was discussed. The panel discussion was broadcasted live on *Fiji One*. The issues raised by the panel members and the feedback from the general public is shared with the qualification providers for their consideration in developing new tourism programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was unfortunate that Vocational Centres in Secondary Schools were closed by the previous Government. We are now reopening them, and the aim of these Vocational Centres is to offer Technical, Vocational and Education Training (TVET) programmes for Certificate Level I and Level II to Year 11 and Year 12 students respectively, and articulate them into Certificate III, Diplomas and Degrees offered at the universities and technical institutions. Sir, the above initiative is per the curriculum reforms outlined in the *2023 Denarau Declaration* of the National Education Summit.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Higher Education Commission Fiji is implementing Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policy within the higher education institutions. This policy is a framework to evaluate the extensive experience of individuals without formal qualification, and award them with appropriate qualifications based on their industry experience.

Within the tourism industry, there are skilled professional workers whose industry expertise surpass formal qualification. Yet, a first limitation in career advancement due to not having a recognised qualification certificate. The introduction of RPL addresses this gap by providing a pathway for recognising and accrediting the valuable experience and compensating them with deserving higher remuneration. The aim is to hold back good workers from leaving the industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the imperative task of addressing the skills gap has been diligently cascaded to the Provincial Council level as well. In November 2023, the Higher Education Commission Fiji held a meeting with the representatives from the 14 Provincial Councils, including Rabi and Kioa.

The aim is to provide education and training to the unemployed people living in the rural communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we all know, most of the people living in the nearby villages work as service staff in the hotels and resorts. From the Provincial Council meeting, one representative from each Provincial Council has been chosen to identify unemployed youth who would be trained to work in the hotels and resorts located within their Provinces. Sir, I have the pleasure in informing this august Parliament that through this initiative, a number of villagers have been trained and assisted to obtain gainful employment in nearby hotels and resorts. The cost of the training was paid by Tertiary Scholarship and Loans Services (TSLS) from the 1,800 competencies-based skills training grant budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure the relevance and efficacy of upskilling and reskilling initiatives, the Ministry of Education, together with the Ministry of Tourism, will continue to strive in strengthening strategic partnership with the leading industry players. This partnership will facilitate the development of industry relevant curriculum, provision of practical career opportunities and access to mentorship programmes, thereby, assuring that upskilled individuals are well prepared to meet the evolving needs of the tourism industry.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is evident that from the above discussions, initiatives and plans of the Ministry of Education and the Public Service Commission, working collaboratively with industry stakeholders and the qualification training providers is adequately addressing the emerging skill gaps of the tourism and hospitality industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the testimony to my claim, I have here a table - a total of 2,035 students graduated with qualifications in various skillsets within the tourism and hospitality industry over 2023 and into 2024. On the other hand, Sir, it is interesting to note that in the year 2022, almost 100 people were listed in the National Information Centre and are looking for work in the hotel tourism industry.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to inform this august Parliament that whilst there is an increase in skilled migration workers, our education and training providers are standing to the task and producing qualified and trained workers for the available jobs.

I thank the honourable Member for asking the question and giving me the opportunity to update Parliament on the issue of skills gap, the education and training of workers within the tourism and hospitality industry.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I thank you for a comprehensive answer with respect to upskilling, et cetera, that needs to be done and seeing that a lot is actually happening. In the short term, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, is there a contingency plan, bearing in mind that our tourism workers are quite highly sought after, not just by Australia and New Zealand and also by the UAE and other places, and bearing in mind also that migration is happening at break neck speed and the numbers are quite large, is there a contingency plan that incorporates us for the short term, bringing in foreign workers into the industry and also for the ancillary industries to tourism, like the laundry guys, construction guys, et cetera? Have we had discussions with the Ministry of Immigration so that that can be facilitated?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- The foreign content of the workforce is based on speciality bases - special skills. We do not have a programme in place where you could bring in workers, for the want of better words, at the entry level. We are confident that we are producing sufficient numbers to meet any gaps at that level. Just two weeks ago, I officiated in a graduation ceremony of 484 of our

people, who had a six week training in tourism by Polytech, and that is the kind of training that we will do or carry out. We know what they need to do, and we have people like that - service providers -FNU and others, who can train people within six or eight weeks to replace any gaps at that level.

For foreigners, as I have said, it is only at that special skills level. I do not think there is a need right now, Mr. Speaker, to go and bring in numbers as maybe contemplated by other industries in Fiji. We can do it in tourism locally. Thank you.

HON. P. RAVUNAWA.- A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Would the honourable Minister have the percentage of the graduates who have been absorbed into the workforce so far?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not have the exact numbers, but I can assure you that our graduates are competent. Something that I need to impress upon the employers is that they cannot be insisting on people to be work ready. That appears to be a limiting factor sometimes in the way we view our local graduates. They have to give them time to adapt into their system. I was part of a global chain, and it has its systems, its culture and everything else. It took me a couple of months to get to know their system - some of the best developers.

In Fiji today, we have chains like Hilton, Sheraton, Intercontinental, and they are some of the best in the world. So, our people are world trained, they can do the job, but work ready would take three months, four months or five months to get them to be accustomed to the system. I was at the graduation ceremony for USP and FNU lately and being a hotelier myself, what I saw, I am very confident that our people there can rise to the challenge and take on senior roles or specialist roles in tourism.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a question to the honourable Minister, I totally agree with you that those who are coming out of institutions are not work ready. They need to work under someone who will then pass on to them the nous of the job. But in order to that, you need to have people in place that still have that level of competence that allows them to pass on the right things, the right habits, the right attitude, et cetera. So, do you still have that class of worker in the industry that will then be able to pass on this to the new graduates coming out into the hotels?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- The answer is 'yes'. Indeed, some of the big chains, like Marriott, are now working with FNU to help our graduates adapt to the Marriott system and this also happens with Intercontinental and other chains. So, the answer is 'yes', the training programmes in these big chains is quite solid and I believe our people -joining those chains will perform to the expectations, as anywhere else in the world.

The beauty about this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that our graduates, with a couple of years with the lives of Intercontinental, can join any Intercontinental in the world, and that is how good our people are. Your time in a big name like that, we are marketable globally.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I offer the floor to the next author of the question that is going to be raised, I would like to acknowledge once more the presence of a few faces in the gallery. The first one being Mr. Devo, sitting in the gallery on the left, and he will be in charge of our retreat that is going to take place next week. He is from Canada. With them on the same side is once again Mr. Rasova and he is wearing blue and Mr. Rajesh Singh, the former Assistant Minister, not forgetting those on the right, the members of our public. Thank you for taking time to be present here.

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister is not available so am I still allowed to raise the question?

MR. SPEAKER.- Are you raising the question to the Deputy Prime Minister?

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- Yes.

MR. SPEAKER.- But he is in some other official duties. Can we agree to move that to another date?

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- Yes, Sir.

Fire Report - Vatuwaqa Primary School
(Question No. 45/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Tourism and Civil Aviation inform Parliament as to whether the Fire Report from the National Fire Authority on the Vatuwaqa Primary School fire in 2022 has been received?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it must be my lucky day, three questions in a row.

Yes, I can confirm that the Ministry of Education has received the fire report of the fire at Vatuwaqa Primary School. Mr. Speaker, Sir, a total of 347 students and nine teachers were at the school and they have been relocated to the neighbouring primary school, except for the Head of School. The Police have reported that that incident is not accidental. My Ministry has requested a thorough investigation and to prosecute the liable party or parties.

There is a bit of background, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The school started as a Government School in 1906. The controlling authority is the Parents, Teachers Association (PTA) after Government ceased supporting the school. The number of rooms fully damaged were four classrooms, one office and one canteen; partially damaged - one library, one classroom and school hall. The fire started from the canteen area.

We leave it at that for this time, Mr. Speaker, but students were relocated to surrounding schools including Draiba Fijian School, Veiuto Primary School, Yat Sen Primary School, John Welsey Primary School and Pundit Vishnu Deo Memorial Primary School and other home zone schools. Furniture was also supplied with school stationery items for students. So, every student and teacher have been placed elsewhere.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you have noticed, the fire happened long time ago. I had asked this question last year and we were told in this Parliament that they were waiting for the fire report. My question is, 16 months now, his predecessor in the last sitting committed to repairing the school. Is the Government still committed to repair the school, now that they received the fire report in this financial year?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the school budget for 2024-2025 includes the budget for the rehabilitation of the school.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the students from Vatuwaqa Primary School were moved to other schools. Did the Ministry carry out any survey to understand the emotional impact on students in their studies?

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

MR. SPEAKER.- Hold on honourable Minister, it is rather noisy. Honourable Hem Chand has raised a good question, it is to do with trauma. That is all.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, let us just remember one thing, the fire occurred during their watch.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- So, all the efforts are being made to rehabilitate the school, and as I have said, all the students have been looked after.

END OF WEEK STATEMENTS

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, may I remind you that each Member may speak for up to 10 minutes. The Minister or Minister's responsible for the subject matter of the Member's speech may respond. No seconder is required, and there will be no other debate soon after the speech has been delivered.

Farmer's Perspective on the Dairy Sector

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to make my End of Week Statement in relation to the Dairy Industry from the farmer's perspective.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the dairy industry in Fiji started after the World War I by the European servicemen. These farms in Tailevu were involved in churning cream and supplying to the first butter factory which was established in Korovou in 1921. By 1924, another two butter factories were setup - one in Waila, Nausori on the banks of Rewa River, later to become Rewa Cooperative Dairy Company Limited; and the other was in Navua known as Fiji Pastoral Company.

Later on, some Sikh community moved to Tailevu to help further develop the industry and now are major contributors to the total national raw milk production. I was told Kashmir Singh, together with his son Harvinder Singh, who are the largest single producer of raw milk in Fiji.

By 1968, all these three companies had merged to become Rewa Cooperative Dairy Company Limited (RCDCL) and also by this time, the factory had moved or relocated to Nabua so it could be closer to the market.

Mr. Mr. Speaker, Sir, production from the peak of over 10 million litres has dropped down to 6 million litres in 2023. This decline in production was not the result of the factory being sold to RCDCL but was due to prevalence of Bovine Brucellosis and Bovine Tuberculosis in the dairy industry. The industry has lost over 5,000 productive animals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not see any other career as dedicated and demanding as a dairy farmer. Day in day out, they have to go out there and manage the stock and carry out their farming duties. Farmers have to wake up as early as 3.00 am to bring the cows in for milking. This is not done five days a week or seven days a week, this is done in 365 days a year. No other job demands this kind of dedication and for this, I salute our dairy farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, not specific to dairy, but in Fiji, agriculture or farming is not seen as a career and this has resulted in aging farmers, the dairy is no exception. This has been influenced by the

urban sector drift and for employment in non-agriculture sector, it is perceived to have better salary and better life. Dairy is seen as a labour intensive, risky and lack of prestige profession compared to the jobs.

In most of the small holder farms, dairy farming is not commercially looked at. Some farmers resort to selling their animals to meet community engagements or other financial needs. They do not realise that this is their stock which is generating them income and replacing this sold stock will take, at least, a year and half or two years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, farmer trainings by relevant authorities have almost grinded to a standstill and the focus of these institutions have been shifted from serving the farmers and advisory to running coffee shops and supermarkets. Institutions have lost focus of its responsibility of serving the dairy industry and the dairy farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the cost of farm inputs have risen significantly. To gain efficiency in production, the industry needs consistent supply of dairy feed of good quality. Apart from two ingredients, the rest are either imported or a by-product of imported commodity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, soil conditions on the farms after generations of grazing has deteriorated. Liming is a common practice that needs to be done to improve soil condition, particularly in acidic soils. This neutralises the acidic soil, improves soil condition and improves nutrient uptake.

Mr. Speaker Sir, land lease security is mandatory for dairy farming. There are some farmers whose land leases have not been renewed and this is sending chills down the spine of few other farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, stock or animal theft on the dairy farms negatively affects production and the overall farm efficiency. The dairy sector has recently seen a surge in theft of dairy animals. Just on one farm, Sir, 24 animals were stolen within a span of five months. Reports have been lodged, culprits have been identified and still, nothing has been done.

Despite the assurance of the Permeant Secretary of Ministry of Defence, nothing has been done so far. The farmers are questioning whether the Police is capable of resolving the issue. The faith on the efficiency of Police is dwindling down.

The farmers have also requested Government's assistance in establishing pasture and fodder banks. Malato and juncao are two fodder species introduced by the previous Government, but more needs to be introduced, including other good fodder products. This will enable the farmers to provide required nutrients to the dairy animals.

Good quality pasture and good fodder can have a positive impact on milk quality and milk production. It also reduces the supplementary Fiji requirement in the dairy. Having a fodder bank on the farm will also cushion the effects of climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our farmers are struggling to meet the high cost of farm inputs. Farmers need assistance in dairy feed. The price of one of our local product, molasses, have almost doubled in the recent years.

Farm chemicals is mandatory for dairy farms to maintain quality and hygiene, and this needs to be subsidised so that, we are able to use the right product on the farm.

The reliance on labour on dairy farm is heavy, therefore, investment in milking machines and

The reliance on labour on dairy farm is heavy, therefore, investment in milking machines and other machines is important. They are requesting Government to subsidise the cost of milking machines and milking machine parts and dairy drugs.

Animal health is of utmost importance in maintaining good efficiency on the farm. Therefore, the farmers are requesting the Government to assist them with subsidised dairy drugs, including antibiotics for control of mastitis, which is prevalent in our farms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture in conjunction with the relevant authorities needs to embark on a breed improvement plan for all farmers, especially those who have lost a significant number of animals due to bovine brucellosis and bovine tuberculosis. The large farms are the ones which are commercially run and have the capability of increasing production. Often these breed improvement programmes are not run on these farms. Farmers are asked to either eradicate the disease off completely before any assistance can be provided. If the Ministry starts waiting long enough, there will be no large farms to provide any assistance to.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is evident that Fiji cannot import cattle from Australia and New Zealand due to diseases prevalent in these countries. Therefore, the Government needs to embark on a major artificial breeding programme using embryo transfer and artificial insemination. New Zealand has over 4 million cows and out of that, 3.9 million cows had been artificially bred in the dairy. Fiji has less than 10,000 cows. There is nothing that should stop us from doing so. Calf rearing is another area the farmers need assistance in. The subsidised calf milk needs to continue so that the farmer can rear good quality calves which can become better quality milking animals later on.

Mr Speaker Sir, the elements of climate change has seriously affected the dairy industry. First is the availability of clean water on the farms. Some farms have almost no access to clean water on the farm. The farmers have requested if other means could be explored, including boreholes on the farms so that they can have access to clean water and maintain quality on the farm. Heat stress has significantly contributed to the decrease in the milk letdown. The erection of pre-milking covered holding yards can help in reducing the heat stress. The reduction of heat stress can increase the milk production by 5 percent to 7 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, continuous training is very important in the industry, therefore, the farmers have requested if a model farm and a heifer rearing farm can be established. These farms, together with these courses run by FNU can provide training for optimum management of dairy farms. Farmers, together with their farm hands can be trained there. This week, honourable Tubuna, while deliberating on the Ministry of Agriculture's Annual Report asked if the farmers are prepared to change. Yes, farmers are preparing for change.

MR. SPEAKER.- Please, do round off, honourable Nand.

HON. S. NAND.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Farmers, if see it, feel it, they will change it. Finally, raw milk price has slightly increased over the last few years. However, it was not sufficient enough to cover all the costs of production. I thank the Government for providing a top-up on the farm gate price and look forward to their continued support. However, Sir, they have also pointed out that the price of butter fat still stands at \$5.80 a kilogramme. One only needs to look at the price of butter on the shelves in the market to see the huge disparity. The farmers have humbly requested the Government if they can intervene and ensure a just price for excess butter fat is received by farmers. They will be forever grateful.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with this, I would like to thank the honourable Members for listening to this End of Week Statement and thank the Government for its continued support to the dairy industry,

and I look forward to this continued support.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me thank the honourable Sachida for a comprehensive speech on the state of the dairy industry in Fiji. Let me just take us a little back in time. On Friday, 24th March 2017, just a little over seven years ago, honourable Prof. Prasad had moved a motion and I quote:

“That this Parliament agrees that in light of the struggling dairy industry and worsening plight of dairy farmers, an extensive rehabilitation package be implemented for the vibrance and vitality of the dairy industry and the dairy farmers.”

Of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the then FijiFirst Government rejected the motion outright. The then Attorney-General and Minister for Economy labelled the call for assistance to dairy farmers as political. The honourable Prof. Biman Prasad was likened to a spider moving from the sugar industry to the dairy industry. Now, seven years later the former CEO of FCDCL, the honourable Sachida Nand who is now a member of the FijiFirst Opposition wants dairy farmers helped and I thank him for that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, call it political grandstanding, one upmanship, *taulo*, *masipolo* or whatever it was then, I call on the Opposition to show a genuine sense of bipartisanship for now for the good of our dairy farmers and the nation. Mr. Speaker, Sir, milk production statistics from 2009 to 2023 shows that milk production has grown by 1.1 percent annually. However, the volume of formal milk production that is supplied directly to the dairy industry has fallen by 34.5 percent over the same period.

During this period, formal milk production peaked at 8.96 million litres in 2014. In 2023, it was 5.8 million litres. Worse, Mr. Speaker, Sir, only 46 farmers supply 74 percent of formal milk production as of December 2023. This is out of the 161 farmers engaged in the dairy industry. In 2023, the total milk production was 11.35 million litres, only 5.87 million litres were from dairy farmers as formal production which is 51.7 percent of total milk production. Therefore, 48.3 percent was not formal milk production.

Despite giving zero rated exclusivity to a corporate giant for 10 years, the former government miserably failed to help dairy farmers in terms of both boosting their production, increasing the number of farmers and reducing cost of production. That company a subsidiary of a corporate giant milked profits and left the dairy farmers high and dry.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- The formal milk production figures is testimony to this indisputable fact. Honourable Sachida Nand knows this too well but will not say it for obvious reasons. Nevertheless, dairy remains one of the important industries as it provides economic benefits for livelihoods and income generation to hundreds of dairy farmers and their families in Fiji. Mr. Speaker, Sir, considering the high number of challenges faced by the industry, the Government continues to support and provide incentives through various programmes to strengthen the dairy industry. From 2010 to 2023, a total of \$29 million have been allocated by the Ministry through the following programmes;

- Dairy development programme; and
- Dairy industry programme.

The highest amount of \$5.5 million was allocated to the dairy industry this financial year by

the Coalition Government. Under these programmes, farmers have been assisted with initiatives like the price incentive where the Government provides a top up related to the milk price, subsidises milk cartage, feed, and calf milk replacer, provides basic infrastructures such as dairy sheds, calf sheds, stock yards, et cetera. These initiatives have been provided to enhance the productivity of dairy farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as has been rightly stated by my friend, honourable Sachida, apart from the above programmes, the dairy industry has also assisted in the control of Brucellosis and Tuberculosis. In 2009, Brucellosis re-emerged while Tuberculosis reached its peak of infections in 2014 causing severe devastation to the dairy industry. Initially some farms experienced a high prevalence rate of TB infected animals reaching up to 60 percent. However, due to the Ministry's Ongoing Testing Programme, these farms now have a prevalence rate of 1 percent to 2 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has successfully decreased the Brucellosis infection with no cases being reported over the last three years. Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of the Ministry's Rehabilitation Programme, farmers have been assisted through the improvement of fencing, provision of calf rearing facility for farmers, provision of stockyard for birth control of animals, compensating farmers who lost their livestock through TB and Brucellosis.

Further, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the challenges due to inbreeding on farms have been addressed by the Government through the introduction of the artificial insemination programme, and of course, the embryo transfer programme where we now have four new cattle breeds, one of them being the Brown Swiss which turns out to be both a dairy and beef breed. Mr. Speaker, Sir, apparently the Ministry is providing bulls with improve genetics to farms that have been declared free of TB and Brucellosis in order to improve the genetics on those farms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, like any other agriculture sector, the present generation are not interested in making dairy their livelihood. To combat this endemic issue, the Ministry and Fiji Higher Education Commission in collaboration with Navuso Agricultural Technical Institute have introduced a National Qualification Certificate in Dairy Production to young farmers. The first cohort of 15 young farmers have recently graduated from this Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to address labour shortage, the Ministry has provided machines to assist farmers which include milking machines, roto harvesters, soft cutters to ease the process of milking harvesting and feeding cattle. Funds have been provided to farmers for the improvement and establishment of parcels through land preparation using tractors and diggers. Recently, the dairy industry has encountered a significant increase in the cost of inputs. To mitigate these high costs, several activities are subsidised through the dairy development programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, land as correctly stated by the honourable Sachida is a sensitive issue and the Ministry is not mandated to negotiate lease renewal with landowners, but it works with iTLTB to deal with this issue and has been collaborating with other stakeholders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a lack of reinvestment by dairy farmers on their farms and farmers are mostly dependent on Government assistance to improve their facilities. These farmers also tend to invest elsewhere from the proceeds gained from the dairy business.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the financial technical support provided by Government has contributed to an increase in milk supply from 4.2 million millilitres to 5.87 million millilitres in 2023. There is an indication that the milk productivity per farmer and account numbers have increased, and farms are recovering well from the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic and the outbreak of TB and Brucellosis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, efforts are underway by the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways to develop the informal dairy sector and capitalise on milk production mainly from smallholder farms to ensure that milk is pasteurised to reduce the risk of transmission of zoonotic disease.

As part of the Ministry of Agriculture's expansion plan, we will further develop the necessary infrastructure for dairy farms in the Western, Central and Northern Division. The Ministry is committed to assisting farmers in addressing their challenges in collaboration with all stakeholders through various interventions to improve farm productivity and profitability.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I would like to draw your attention that we might be going over the 12.30 mark in our sitting today, and as such for the purpose of complying with Standing Orders with respect to the sitting times, I now call upon the Leader of Government in Parliament to move a Suspension Motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

Under Standing Order 6, that so much of Standing Order 23(1) is suspended so as to allow Parliament to sit beyond 12.30 p.m. today to complete the remaining items listed in today's Order Paper.

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as indicated, we still have End of Week of Statements numbers two, three and four to complete which is the reason why we are putting this Suspension motion forward.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE END OF WEEK STATEMENTS

Cost of Living in Fiji Today

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, and honourable Members, one of the single greatest thing affecting your normal every Fijian today is the cost of living. The cost of what they have to pay or what they have to purchase in order just to live their normal lives. Everyday (I think all of us), we meet people who complain about these all the time. We meet them in the taxis, buses, churches, outside here or wherever we go – in the markets, people are always complaining about these. It is in sessions, and it is never ending. I think people have the right to be able to do that because they are just talking about the problems that they face every day. They have the right to talk about their day-to-day problems and we have all noticed these with our own eyes as we move around Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for me in particular, just speaking about myself, I live in Nakasi and we buy our vegetables at a little roadside market there. There is a lady by the name of Mouna that we buy from, and this past year, I have seen the sizes of the pile of cassava that she sells for \$10 get smaller and smaller and smaller. Just in one year, it has really shrunk the amount of cassava that you can get for \$10. It has become much smaller.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a few months ago, you could buy a sack of cassava wholesale at maybe at \$60 or \$70. At one time, it shot up to \$150 but that is what is happening, everything is getting much more expensive. My family is one which eats rice very rarely, but today \$10 worth of rice now goes far more than \$10 worth of cassava. The \$10 worth of cassava just goes in one meal, so even for people like us, our dietary habits are beginning to change.

As people try to make do with the resources that they have, I am lucky, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have this job, I earn an income and if I want to eat cassava, I will eat cassava but that is not true for everyone else in the greater Suva region. It is not true for everyone else. The price of everything has gone up. Everything!

HON. K.K. LAL.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Nothing where the price has gone down, everything has gone up, not just food items, wherever you pay VAT, that price has gone up and it is affecting everyone right across this country. To a large degree, people's incomes have not moved up; so, when your income is not moving up and the things that you are paying, the price is going up. What happens? You are creating more and more hardship.

What this Government has done so far, so this country this past year, one thing it has achieved is giving more people hardship to the cost of living that is high. You have created hardships.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- The Deputy Prime Minister is smiling there, but he has not looked into people's eyes, as I talked to them face to face, you can see the pain that they have in their eyes. Pain in their eyes when they talk about this thing, Mr. Speaker, Sir. They wring their hands like I'm wringing my hands. What is going on? What is happening? What is this Government doing?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hardship has been created in all of this, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- You created it during your time. That is why it is happening.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister is going to say, "hey, that inflation, a lot of it is imported." That has happened, we know that all that has happened because when the imported inflation comes in, it affects everything in your domestic. It affects the costs of fuel and affects everything else. But here, the really bad thing is this. This is the really bad thing.

HON PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Oh come on!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very, very bad thing that happened.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.-What is that?

HON. J. USAMATE. – Were you being hit by this imported inflation then this Government decided to increase VAT.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Yeah!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- More and you are wrong.

HON. J. USAMATE.- When we were being hit by this imported inflation, let us put another nail in the coffin

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Hogwash

HON. J. USAMATE.- Then they increased VAT and then just exacerbated the whole thing. It made it worse right across the country. Everybody felt it, there is no part of this country where people did not feel that.

What they basically did, they took our people, they waited for the bus, and they threw them under the bus...

HON. K.K. LAL.- Very poor

HON. J. USAMATE.- ... even while they were going through all that imported inflation. There are all kinds of things that happened then. Have you have seen some funny things happened, Mr. Speaker, Sir? We have had even this thing happened in Fiji, it is shrinkflation. That means, there used to be a bottle of milk cost like this, maybe it costs \$5, they will say. "oh, the same bottle of milk is still at \$5 but they reduced the amount of milk in the bottle; that is called shrinkflation. That has been happening in some places and it has happened a lot in other countries and probably happening here too though.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, earlier this week, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister was talking about the reduction in import excise of 10 percent. But the funny thing is this, with the reduction of that import excise on chicken portions, what happened to the prices of chicken portions in the shop, did it decline?

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- No.

HON. J. USAMATE. – No, it did not.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- So there is something going there. Somebody is making money out of these policy changes. We run to the shop, we see it does not decline much. The point is, what is happening to all these things?

Apology, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is not only affecting the buyers. This week we went and visited some small shops in Suva. We visited one lady that sells handicrafts, and she says that the amount of sales that they have got from last year to this year has declined. When we interviewed her, she had not sold a single thing. It shows that people have less discretionary income to buy the things that they normally want to buy. Two other shops that we visited too they said the same thing, they did not have enough money and sales were down. People do not have enough money to buy the small things that they used to buy before and we hear this across the board for all the businesses in Suva where revenue is down. Government has been saying that inflation is because of imports (fair enough)...

MR. SPEAKER.- Is it shrinking?

(Laughter)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Government needs to start asking what they can do. We are thankful to Government for all the assistance to the social wages, all the things that it has done to help the people of Fiji, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister has already hinted one thing this week that maybe we could buy chicken from Indonesia rather than from New Zealand - we can explore those things.

We note also that FCCC has just announced it will undertake a market inquiry into the present practice of the supermarket industry from the 1st of next month. This is welcomed but I think this should have happened long time ago. As you have seen what had happened in the chicken portions.

Obviously, when these things are happening, some people are playing funny business around the place. Government needs to look at what it can do, so that it can help the people who are suffering. People are suffering under the high cost of living, suffering abysmally, they need some assistance, the Government needs to relieve the pressure.

Inflation was there, yes, but Government needs to do something to help the people of this country so that they can live with the high cost of living that they are facing right now. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his statement. I am afraid honourable Usamate is fast earning a title of Mr. Hogwash. The literal meaning of 'hogwash' is nonsense and a word designed to deceive the people. Precisely, that is what the honourable Member was trying to do when he was talking about the cost of living.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all of us appreciate the fact that there has been changes in the prices and honourable Usamate, being a statistician, understands this very well.

The other point that I want to make is that the Opposition actually fails to appreciate what the Coalition Government has been working very diligently to address some of the fundamental issues in the economy, starting from looking at how we can reform our revenue measures and aspart of that, we have instituted and implemented tax reforms. They talk about VAT, they make a big deal about it, they go and actually lie to the people that everything has increased in terms of prices is simply because of VAT, and that is a complete lie. Let me just give for their purpose and for the people of this country the history of VAT.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, VAT was first introduced in 1992 under the SVT Government of 10 percent. It was raised to 12.5 percent in 2003 and in 2011, under the Bainimarama Government, it was increased to 15 percent.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That was under Bainimarama Government.

Then, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we, in the Opposition, were raising the impact of VAT in 2016, it was high.

In 2016, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the same Government (FijiFirst Government) adopted 9 percent VAT with no zero rating on basic food items. Then in 2021 and 2022, they changed it further to three rates - zero percent for 21 basic food items; 9 percent and 15 percent. Obviously, that created quite a bit of distortion. Government was actually losing revenue, so when we came into Government, we reformed the system. We kept the 21 items zero-rated, and on top of that, we added

prescribed medicine. So, if you go to a doctor, you get a prescription, you go to the pharmacy, you do not pay back. We have now 22 items and we raised the VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent, and those that were 15 percent, we kept it there. So, that is the history of VAT, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Usamate agreed that there are other factors that cause the prices, for example, the Red Sea crisis right now, and he talked about imported inflation, that is always the case. But, as a government, we recognised that even with zero percent VAT on 21 basic food items, post-COVID-19 and during COVID-19, when the freight costs went up by three times or four times up, that pushed the prices with zero percent VAT on basic food items. So, even post-COVID-19, the freight cost remained high, so in some cases, even with zero percent VAT on basic food items, the prices still went up.

However, we, as a government, recognised that and one of the first things that we did when we came into Government, in the first month, we recognised that people needed support, we allocated \$50 million, we paid \$200 each to more than 200,000 students right from pre-school to Year 12.

We repeated that, again, this year, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Again, we put in \$43 million and, again, we have more than 212,000 students. We also allocated \$7.5 million to continue the 10 percent reduction in bus fares for additional six months, and we made sure that we forgive \$650 million – the burden on 53,000 families.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Graduates coming out of the university, having to start paying all that income, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is now in the pockets of those families and households. We also made sure in the Budget that we did not touch the income tax threshold, so all those people earning below \$30,000 are not paying any income tax.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they do not want to hear the truth because this is what they do. They go out there and lie to the people.

(Chorus on interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- In the Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have also reduced duties on a number of items. This is the report I received from Fiji Competition and Consumer Commission (FCCC) - a brief, and contrary to what honourable Usamate said when he made the generalisation, he said that the prices of all things have gone up. All things! That was what he said and that was also what the report said.

Let me redo the list of items on which the prices have actually gone down, Mr. Speaker. I will give them this report so that they can take it and show it to the people and stop lying. Let me read the list - edible oil, butter, liquid milk, powdered milk, baby milk, canned fish, corned meat, salt, margarine, tea leaves, under the produce, the prices of potatoes, onions, and garlic have gone down.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Additionally, Mr. Speaker, from the Budget, whatever

additional revenue we got, we increased monthly pension for all Government pensioners by 15 percent, monthly allowance increased from \$100 to \$115 for people above 65 years and increased those from \$100 to \$125 for people over 70 years. We increased the Family Assistance Scheme.

We increased the monthly Children Protection Allowance, allowance for Persons with Disability was increased from \$90 to \$104 per month, Bus Fare Allowance for the elderly and disabled has been allocated \$25 per month, free health schemes provided to patients by private general practitioners with a combined household income of \$30,000 or less, continuation of the EFL and water subsidy. So, these are things, Mr. Speaker, that the Government has done to mitigate, not impact...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C.PRASAD.- Not only that but also the impact of the imported inflation.

The other point, Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Usamate....

(Hon. P.D. Kumar interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Honourable Kumar is always very irritating, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Laughter)

HON. PRO. B.C. PRASAD.- Honourable Usamate is a bit of an economist, he needs to understand this because you cannot hold the prices, even if you had zero VAT or no VAT at all, still you will find that the prices will increase because there are other factors.

The important thing for us as a Parliament and as a government, including those in the Opposition, is that we have to understand that we have to find ways to increase the income, put more money into the pockets of the people. Some of the measures we have done, are actually doing that.

I have said this in Parliament before, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that as a result of shortage of labour, formal sector employment has not only increased but the wages in the formal sector has also increased by about 10 percent to 12 percent.

So, there are some natural corrective measures, and he talked about vegetables. He was trying to give the story about vegetable prices. Mr. Speaker, vegetable prices is based on supply and demand. If it has been raining for one-and-a-half months and there is flooding, and you go to the market, you are going to get cassava this much and costing you more. What is the economics there? Oh, that is simple supply and demand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to assure the people of this country, yes, we understand that some prices have gone up, we that some people might be struggling, but as I have indicated, the Budget has a very clear plan in terms of helping our people.

In the next Budget, we have already announced that minimum wages is being reviewed and during the next Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will announce that.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- So, I want assure the people of this country that the Government is fully aware of that and the measures that we have to put in will help the people. Thank

you, Mr. Speaker.

Fiji's Air Services Agreement

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament and members of the public sitting in the gallery and all those tuning in live on Parliament *Facebook* channel; I am pleased to present an End of Week Statement that gives insight into the rights that governs airlines of each country to fly into another country's air space and land at their airports.

The freedom to fly from one sovereign State to another is not a right but rather an outcome of interstate negotiations, the outcomes of which are embedded in bilateral Air Services Agreements (ASAs). Mr. Speaker, Sir, ASAs permit international air transport services between two parties involved in a negotiation process and specify a wide terms and conditions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the life of aviation is an admiration for whoever looks up to the clouds, stars and sky. Civil Aviation is a transnational global enterprise that supports the world economy by facilitating efficient cross-border air transportation. Air transport supports integration into the global economy and provides critical connectivity on national, regional and international levels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the importance of air transport stems from its ability to create and support jobs, enhance trade and connectivity between people and countries, promote tourism and connect remote communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the bilateral Air Transport Agreement, also known as Air Services Agreement, between two sovereignties, comprise various clauses and rules that govern the terms and conditions of international air travel.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, due to the importance of this Agreements and the unique characteristics of individual countries, the content of an ASA may vary, depending on a number of factors, most notably the preferences of parties and their territories.

Nonetheless, there are certain basic components seen in most ASAs. These features include the route designation, tariffs and pricing, capacity and frequency, safety and security standards, customs and immigration regulations and environmental and regulatory compliance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are three types of ASAs -

1. Traditional ASAs which specify the number of carriers, which country, the aircraft types, the number of flights and the destination that each country airline can serve.
2. Liberal ASAs which allows for greater flexibility and less government control over the number of carriers for each country, as well as the aircraft type and frequency of flights and destinations. Liberal ASAs allow for market-based pricing but they also allow for government intervention.
3. Open Skies ASAs which do not limit the number of services, capacity and route an airline can operate.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, airlines in each country can determine their own prices based on market conditions. Fiji currently has a total of 29 bilateral ASAs that have been negotiated over the years. A few of these ASAs dates back to colonial times. These ASAs are traditional and have

limitation on capacity, frequency and the routes to be operated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fundamental consideration before engaging into discussions for potential destination is it will bring significant benefits to the Fijian economy and the tourism sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, ASAs allow airlines that are parties to the Agreement to operate commercial air services under the terms of Agreement. Presently, nine international airlines provide commercial air services to Fiji, as a result of this ASAs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our national airline - Fiji Airways, directly operates to 24 destinations both, regional and international, and have recorded six consecutive years of successive growth in passenger numbers from 5 percent to 20 percent for the period 2018 to 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, most of the existing ASAs are considered outdated and restrictive with specific limitations. This is the case with our existing ASAs in the Pacific Island region.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government is committed to support Fiji's growth as a heart in the South Pacific through the restructuring of these ASAs whilst at the same time, safeguarding our national airline and the Fijian economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, negotiations are currently ongoing with likeminded countries about reviewing ASAs, as well as expansion of existing bilateral ASAs to cover code-share services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, airlines are continually finetuning their routes to accommodate traffic growth, changes in aircraft technology and other factors. Consideration is extended to the economic viability of our national airline.

Marketing arrangements through code-sharing is being aimed to extend the scope of Fiji Airways' route networks, eliminating double marginalisation, to establish our presence in foreign markets where they would otherwise not be allowed to operate due to regulatory reasons.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government in this regard has been able to establish a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on co-operative marketing arrangements with the government of Korea in 2023.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, the Government of New Caledonia and Fiji have entered into a new Code Sharing Agreement that has enabled code share relationship between Fiji Airways and Air Caledonie. As I speak, Sir, similar arrangements are being pursued with other countries as well.

Mr. Speaker, market access privileges which is commonly referred to as 'traffic lights' under the ASA have historically been subject to a number of protectionist conditions, including *inter alia* or 'caps' on the number of flights flown over a given period of time, pre-determined limits on the number of passengers or cargo carried and the rates of return regulations.

Mr. Speaker, the commercial aviation industry is cyclical, such that revenues are generally high in the period of economic prosperity and expansion and are lower in the period of economic downturn and contraction. There is a need to rationalise capacity and explore new markets in order to grow and generate revenue.

Mr. Speaker, greater commercial freedom allows airlines to improve productivity and efficiency. The Fiji Government is supportive of liberalisation of air services that will create the freedom for airlines to operate on a fully commercial basis, allowing them to allocate capital more

efficiently, to respond better to changes in demand and markets and to improve productivity.

Mr. Speaker, an Open Skies approach is now being implemented, allowing for the negotiation of Open Skies ASA on a case by case basis. In advocating the review and potential modernisation of our existing ASAs, Government, at this time, is negotiating an Open Skies ASA with United States of America to boost passenger numbers and revenue for our national airline.

Mr. Speaker, this initiative aims to attract 40,000 additional passengers in the first year, leading to projected annual increases for up to 75,000. This growth is expected to generate \$150 million to \$170 million per year in revenue, along with an extra \$20 million to \$30 million from cargo and ancillary services, benefiting Fiji's foreign current reserves.

Mr. Speaker, entering into an Open Skies ASA with the United States, will also allow code sharing between airlines of both countries. Fiji Airways is a member of One World Alliance, which also includes American Airlines. Therefore, Fiji Airways plans to include the Dallas-Fort Worth Texas as a new service destination. It is home to the second largest airline hub globally and serves as the base for American Airlines.

Mr. Speaker, honourable Members of Parliament and fellow citizens, the role of ASAs in Civil Aviation in Fiji cannot be over emphasised. These Agreements are instrumental in the efficient regulation of international air transport, promoting growth in the aviation industry and ensuring connectivity between Fiji and other nations.

Mr. Speaker, please, allow me, on behalf of the honourable Prime Minister and the People's Coalition Government, to convey our best wishes to both our men's and women's Fijian Drua Team the very best in their respective matches this afternoon.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to acknowledge the support of the Australian Government, its people and sports organisations and sports development in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, just before I take my seat, I would also like to wish all the schools that will be participating in the Fiji's Secondary Schools Rugby League semi-finals this Saturday. I would like to send good wishes to the Under 15 and 17 of Queen Victoria School Knights and the Under 19 Ra High School Roosters, that defeated the defending champion last Saturday to claim a spot in the semi-final this week.

Mr. Speaker, lastly, may I also wish all our athletes who are also preparing for the upcoming Coca-Cola Games, the very best in their preparation. I wish the athletes from QVS and ACS also the very best in the upcoming games. *Kui tale mada o Waimanu! Vinaka.*

MR. CHAIRMAN.- I now call on the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Tourism and Civil Aviation for his response.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to commend the honourable Assistant Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation on her comprehensive statement regarding Air Services Agreement (ASA).

As we navigate the skies of progress, allow me to augment this discourse with figures and percentages that underscore the significance of this Agreement. Air transport is not just about planes and runways, it is about livelihoods. Our aviation industry contributes significantly to Fiji's economy.

To quantify these impacts, the passenger numbers, Mr. Speaker, Fiji Airways since consecutive years of passenger growth has grown from 5 percent to 20 percent, which reflects a robust demand for Fiji and for our national airline. We may know that our national airlines is now a billion-dollar company, so it is growing quite significantly. The Open Skies Agreement with USA aims to attract 40,000 passengers in the past year, leading to projected annual increases up to 75. There is this belief that we have tried to correct from the other side, that they are the only ones who care about Fiji Airways.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Everyone in this country have been supportive of Air Pacific and its growth over the years. We were weak, we intervened at a critical juncture in the life of Fiji Airways. Just cool down and please realise that it is our national airline, that we all love our national airline and we want it to perform to the best and under this Coalition Government, the years ahead are going to be very promising.

As indicated by my Assistant Minister, the American service will generate \$150 million to \$170 million from passengers and then cargo and as indicated, we are in the process of negotiating with the Americans. The agreement as it stands today allows Fiji to fly to Honolulu, Los Angeles (LA) and San Francisco whereas the Americans have unlimited, there is no restrictions for them in this part of the world, even on a freedom basis, you can fly to Australia and New Zealand.

The ASA that we are negotiating with them will allow us to fly with any points in America. Cabinet recently revamped our ASA policies to enable us to go on open skies on a case by case basis with countries and the Americans, welcomed that, hence the confidence that we can fly into other points other than Honolulu, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

On the current routes now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have Australia, New Zealand, USA (as stated), Singapore, Hong Kong, Narita and various Pacific Islands. In the eyes of the global community, when they look at the Pacific Islands, Fiji is pivotal, and Fiji Airways plays a very big part in that. We are also in the process of talking to the Chinese, they are also interested in coming to Fiji and we are also looking at ways we can facilitate that.

On code sharing and global reach with Fiji Airways and Air Calédonie, a new code sharing agreement enables seamless travel between our nations, fostering connectivity and tourism. We are looking at improving connectivity within the South Pacific - New Caledonia, Fiji, Apia, Cook Islands up to Papeete, and we want to bring in that connectivity that connects the island countries. A lot of dialogue is going into this and driven also by our neighbours. They want the connectivity, knowing the strength of Fiji Airways.

On Dallas Fort Worth, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is the home to American Airlines. They have 1,000 flights a day into Dallas. With American Airlines, they have a frequent flyer programme numbering 154 million members. Immediately we fly to Dallas with American Airlines, 154 million people will know about Fiji. It will become part of the network, you cannot pay for that in dollars with that kind of numbers, committed frequent flyers while the people in the loyalty programmes for American Airlines and by extension, Fiji Airways.

We have had historical constraints, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but we are addressing that through bilateral on a case by case basis, opening up the skies. We must explore new markets, adapt to the economic cycles and optimise routes to maximise revenue.

I am asked questions about Korea. We have an agreement now with the Korean Government where we can talk to Korean Operators and co-share also. People keep asking me about Korean Air, there are other operators in Korea, Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the years we will continue to have this dialogue and get a better link to Korea.

The passenger surge, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for Nadi now, we know that from the airline perspective it is exceeding two million passengers now, where they counts inwards and outwards. Nadi itself is getting busier by the day, indeed they are plans to expand the facilities in Nadi to enable us to cater to more flights. Currently, if five or seven big jets leave at the same time in Nadi, you can feel the strength on what we currently have. So that is all part of the aviation going forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of ASAs, let us recognise that these agreements are not merely guarantees, they are the conduits of progress. We have to embrace liberalisation, rationalising capacity and fostering global partnerships to elevate Fiji's aviation aspirations. Our skies show old promise, our national airline soars as a beacon of connectivity and something that we are proud of and will continue to support going forward.

Challenge of Drugs and Substance Abuse

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this use of drugs used and abuse amongst our children continue to be a challenge in our country today and that problem is multifaceted in nature and to address it will require the involvement of our children, parents, communities, government, civil society, religious organisations and partners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the *2023 Denarau Declaration*, the health and safety theme targets the measures to be taken to ensure the protection of our students from harm caused by drugs and other illicit substance. This includes proper legislation, education and psychosocial support services.

The Substances Abuse Advisory Council regulates combats and school drugs surveys on an annual basis. In 2022, there were 2,700 cases which represents 1.35 percent of the registered student. In 2023, there were 3,500 cases which represented 1.75 percent of the students. The percentage of student reported to be using drugs is less than 2 percent even though the percentage is small, a gradual increase in three years is a concern and will need the full attention of all stakeholders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot address the issue of drugs used and abused unless we answer the "why question". Why do the user use drugs? Secondly, there is a need to understand the relationship between the user and the drug of their choice. In my address this afternoon, Sir, I will provide some insights into the drug's use and the drug abuse that was sourced in our nation and our young people and the children have become victims and in some cases peddlers and mules.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the years the Substances Abuse and Advisory Council has gathered evidence and with the referral reports from school, we have begun to now clearly identify and understand the drug problem in our society today. Some use drugs due to peer pressure. Sadly, some observe drugs being used in their families, communities and out of curiosity decided to experiment. Another sad reality, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the fact that students use drugs as a coping technique to mask the emotional pains they endure in their lives, such as abuse, neglect and exploitation. The other level is students being exploited by adults to peddle drugs for petty cash.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the use of drugs by students contribute to many of the social ills, school dropout, mental health issues, economical disempowerment, rise in our petty crimes, increase in unplanned and unwanted pregnancies, and general decays in the morale and social fabric of our society today. To address the issue effectively, we must address it as a national security crisis, a

public health crisis, a social crisis, an economic crisis, a community crisis and individual crisis that transcends religious, cultures, geographical, age, status and educational identity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this regard, our Ministry is working closely with the Ministry of Home Affairs, in the development of our National Narcotic Strategy. The strategy outlines the role of each Ministry and stakeholders will play in questioning the problem of drugs in our society. The Ministry has also been working with sects to draft the Volatile Substance Abuse Act 2024.

The Drugs Regulation is currently in the workflow circulation, and we investigate, and once adopted will provide more power to our teams and stakeholders to uphold the retailers and the peddlers of getaway drugs and inhalants responsibility by our current society today. The possibility of penalties and the threat our prosecution will act as an additional deterrent to those peddling and using inhalants to get high in society that we are in, and at present we can actually see the impact in our country today.

The Ministry of Education is responsible for the demand and the high reduction components. The demand components involve legislation, curriculum, training and awareness programme, targeting our students today, the youths and the community members on changing their mindsets and attitude. The harm reduction on the other hand involves the provision of psychological support through counselling, mentoring service to students and likewise our parents who are here in our beloved nation.

The Ministry of Education gets in place the legislations and policies to guide teachers in schools, and procedures they will follow to help and discipline students who are involved in any drug related issue. These policies are reviewed every three years to be relevant to the new changes experienced. However, the topic on the drugs and other illicit substance are included in our school curriculum in the subject of Healthy Living at Primary School and through Family Life Educational at Secondary School.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the training programme is conducted every year to teachers and student leaders on how to address problems of drug use by various students in our schools. Some schools have increased their level of monitoring and supervision by installing close circuit television cameras within the school premises and working closely with parents and community leaders during community outreach programmes seeking their support in their children's education.

The Substance Abuse Advisory Council (SAAC) has conducted training to prefects and teachers in schools on the dangers of drugs and other substances. The content includes the policies, signs of drug use, effect of prolonged drug use, health coping skills, good mental health, leadership and life skills. Those that attend the training would conduct training and awareness in their respective schools. Sir, SAAC has a total of 1,053 students, prefects and 384 teachers from 2023 to 2024. The SAAC conducts training to teachers, faith-based community, leaders on the topics of drugs abuse and strategies on how to assist the students in their respective communities.

They conducted schools and community-based training, empower individual to contextualise the solution to fit the local government, resource structure that is family, the *vanua* and the faith-based system. In addition to the awareness carried out in schools, communities during this Annual International Day Against Drugs Abuse and Illicit Drug Trafficking on 26th of June every year. The school take parts in the drugs prevention and awareness programme performing various activities including oratory, artwork, debate and essay writing based on the theme. The school also invites special guest speakers to address the students on the danger of drugs.

The Ministry also conducted community awareness during school organised community

awareness programme, parents are targeted and reminded of their roles and responsibilities. Sir, SAAC has also participated in faith-based rallies where our groups conduct awareness during evangelism and during church service on Sunday.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry through SAAC has also developed and printed into fabric materials all platforms including school media have been used to campaign on the importance of substance abuse drugs as a chronic health education and social implication and notably on the child but the family.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are thankfully in partnership with the government of Australia under the Vuvale Partnership. The Education Ministry might have to setup four counselling hubs as students support hubs in the government schools in the four educational divisions, the provision of counsellors in schools is needed as drugs and addiction is treated as mental health problem.

To conclude with Mr. Speaker, Sir, I invite the members of this august Parliament to be proactive and join the Education Ministry. Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us be heroes and not zeros, say no to drugs, do not even try it and help to save our children here in our beloved nation, Fiji.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to reiterate that my Ministry is committed to the fight against this drug scourge. We are dedicated and committed to holistic education of each student, and this includes their health and well-being.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our other strategic partners are the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC), NGOs such as Drug Free Fiji, Empower Pacific, Medical Services Pacific and International Non-Government Organisation (INGO). In our most recent dialogue with Drug Free Association and PCC, we are pleased to confirm that a taskforce will be setup to develop a framework that will target youths in an age-appropriate manner. We know that one size does not fit all but the need for targeted interventions for specific population and age including targeting specific groups in the community will be key to systematically addressing this issue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have also begun dialogue with the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, the Bose Levu Vakaturaga and the Ministry of Rural Development to partner with us to eradicate this scourge from within our homes and villages. This approach is in response to our recognition that the drugs have infiltrated our villages and rural settings.

Yesterday, Mr. Speaker, I invited the Council of Churches for dialogue on this and in the dialogue His Grace the Archbishop together with the Council of Churches will be working closely with the Ministry of Education to find ways to eradicate drug usage from within our youth population in Fiji. We are quite encouraged with the way His Grace set up presented the structure within the Catholic Church on how they segmentize youth and how to approach those issues.

I would be asking other churches to visit us and do likewise because what I shared with them yesterday, Mr. Speaker, is that we now know that it is coming into the villages, but our people appear to think that it is someone else's problem, and it will just go away. It is like burying our heads in the sand, Mr. Speaker. So, that is why I am asking the church to play a big role in this and let people know at the *vanua* level that they cannot divorce themselves from the initiatives or from whatever we need to do to eradicate drug usage in our villages.

I am sure we all know that they know in communities who is dealing in drugs, who is using drugs, but they seem to be waiting for someone else to do something about it. I am encouraging the churches through the pulpit fire and brimstone, get the message across that we cannot just sit back and let this thing happen. You have to take ownership of it.

His Grace was talking about some of the retreats that the youth in the Catholic Church normally go to. He said that at the end of the weekend all the youth come back really motivated, fully committed to whatever the retreat was trying to impart to them, but he said that as soon as they come home, it is a different story. So, it is going to be the youth and the parents also hence my request to the church to really take this on from the pulpit and get people to realise that it will not go away. We have to take ownership of it, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

That said, the Ministry of Education has in place legislation and policies to guide teachers in schools on the procedures they will follow to help and discipline students who are involved in any drug related issue. These policies are reviewed every three years to be relevant to the new changes experienced.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I once again invite the Members of Parliament to be proactive and join us fight the drug problem very slowly plaguing our beloved Fiji. I reaffirm the statement by the honourable Assistant Minister for Education, “let us be heroes and not zeros. Say no to drugs and help to save our children and our Fiji.”

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings us to the End of the Week Statements. I like that suggestion that the Churches be involved. Perhaps, if you could take it further, honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Tourism and Civil Aviation, the financing of these Churches to take care of those surveillance because from our National Budget, the Churches need to be helped as well. They have the network there, but it is just the funding of this, extra hands to be brought in on board for them to fully undertake what is required of them.

I have had some very bad experience in my village, the young gentleman murdered his wife. He had three children, two are attending QVS and there is another one who is still in the village, but they are left without a mum now, and their mum happens to come from my clan, so it is a nasty experience. I think we need to all pitch in and help the Government, Churches and our communities to try and tackle this scourge. It is quite a challenge, but it is out there for us. It is amazing, even in my village, there is this drug - ice. It is freely exchanged there but my village is some distance away from Suva. Anyway, we shall move on and hopefully we can get some mind sets there to thrash this out once more.

MR. SPEAKER.- I have been advised that there are no Bills for consideration today. Honourable Premila is always very, very watchful of this particular item. If there is no Bill, then slowly she reacts. I think you just bear with us and hold on for a while. Five are coming as advised by Attorney-General.

ADJOURNMENT

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

That Parliament adjourns until Monday, 20th May, 2024 at 9.30 a.m.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER. - Honourable Members, that concludes the end of our sitting for this week, and I thank you all for your contributions throughout the week. At this juncture, I would like to wish

our Fiji Drua Women's team and the Men's Team the very best in their games later today. I think most of us would be watching the game and most of us, I do not know whether you have bought your tickets or no.

I now declare that Parliament adjourns until Monday, 20th May, 2024, at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 1.18 p.m.