

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

TUESDAY, 21ST MAY, 2024

[CORRECTED COPY]

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The Parliament met at 9.38 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts; and honourable Alikī Bia.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sittings of Parliament held on Monday, 20th May, 2024, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting and all those joining us in the gallery and those watching the proceedings on television and the internet. Thank you for taking interest in the workings of your Parliament.

Year 10 Students & Teachers – Yat Sen Secondary School

Honourable Members, today we are joined by the Year 10 students and teachers of Yat Sen Secondary School. *Vinaka vakalevu*, welcome to your Parliament and I hope that the proceedings this morning will give you some idea of how your Parliament works. Parliament relies on you children, we need more astute ladies to be here representing the people of our country in Parliament. So, you being here is not new, you have your former colleagues in here, some may be Members of Parliament, others are members of the Secretariat, those that run the affairs for the Parliamentarians in our Parliament. *Vinaka vakalevu* for making the effort.

Uncorrected Daily Hansard - Delay

For the information of honourable Members, the Uncorrected *Hansard Report* for yesterday's sitting will be circulated as soon as it is finalised. You may be wondering, honourable Members, as for the \$4.4 million upgrade in our IT, nothing like this will crop up again. I was a bit taken this morning when informed this happened yesterday and was fixed by 5.00 p.m. yesterday. I told them, "\$4.4 million must be worth the investment," otherwise it is just like the IT people, they are so far ahead, they communicate with people abroad, up in the air and everywhere, but for simple things like this when it suffers a glitch like that if I may borrow that word, then it makes us ponder again

whether is this worth the investment? But I promise honourable Members that the Secretariat will really look into this seriously so as to ensure matters like this do not arise again.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the following honourable Ministers have given notice to make Ministerial Statements under Standing Order 40:

1. Honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs;
2. Honourable Minister for Youth and Sports; and
3. Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Justice.

Honourable Members, once again, let me remind you that Ministers may speak up to 20 minutes. Yesterday I was following very closely on the notification of the timing on the walls and even to the Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Professor Biman Prasad, he stuck to the time and that is an achievement.

(Laughter)

When the Statement has been made, the usual comment by the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate will then be given five minutes for those replies.

Recent Visit to the United Kingdom

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament. I also greet those who are listening in or watching us on livestream, and I reiterate the words of welcome to the student who are visiting Parliament this morning. I see my late sister's daughter leading the group and her daughter probably in the group too.

MR. SPEAKER.- *Vinaka.*

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- *Ni sa bula vinaka.* I also thank those who may be listening in by radio this morning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to give a Ministerial Statement about my recent visit to the United Kingdom. In late 2023, Sir, I received an invitation, or the Government received an invitation, it was a very well worded invitation that did not say very much. It said that His Majesty the King was inviting the Prime Minister of Fiji to visit. So, we waited for the Government representative in Fiji, the British High Commission to give us more details about the invitation. Only last month we received confirmation that His Majesty was inviting me to have an audience with him in the palace. I accepted the invitation with great humility knowing that a King's invitation or request is a subject's command and those who have had military training would understand, "Your wish is my command."

The relationship with the United Kingdom, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is deeply intertwined in our modern history. Most of the students who are here with us are history students, also enshrined in our laws, conventions and our institutions, a history that we share in part with those in England at this time. It is a history that teaches us numerous lessons in Government, governance, leadership and life that embodies the balance between tradition and modernity, transitioning from one generation to the next, amidst the complexities around the changing environment we live in.

The visit commenced with a call on His Majesty, King Charles III at Buckingham Palace on 7th May, 2024. It might be interesting to note if our honourable Minister for Home Affairs is aware that they have changed the Crown that is used by the King and all the badges of rank of the British Military. It has gone back to what used to be commonly called the “Georgian Crown” and they have moved away from the Edwardian Crown that Her Late Majesty had used. That is all part of history also for our visitors this morning. True to the respectability of the monarch, the reception was very warm and dignified. I conveyed to her the greetings of the people, the chiefs and the Government of Fiji. When I visited the honourable Speaker of Commons, I also conveyed your greetings, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

These relationships were established in 1874 when the chiefs of Fiji ceded their authority and sovereignty to Her Majesty Queen Victoria on 10th October that year. In our exchange, the words were profound and emanated from a deep sense of affection and a deep and treasured place within the Crown’s reservoir of goodwill for a nation under its realm. We used to be under the realm, we now are under the Commonwealth, but we still maintain that very cordial relationship with the Crown.

I took the opportunity to present my apologies again to His Majesty for my actions in 1987, as I had done to Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II when I visited her in 1998. That action resulted in our expulsion from the Commonwealth. Our withdrawal from the realm was at my declaration of Fiji as a Republic on 7th October, 1987, and with that he wished for Fiji to return to the realm, as Her Late Majesty had told me and as His Majesty said to me last week, “Let it be the will of the people.” The same was also expressed to me by the post-King of Nepal when I visited him the Sunday following the Wednesday when the people trashed and conquered the Palace and took selfies on the throne. I asked him, “Would you be willing to return as the King of Nepal?” He said to me, “General *sahab*, let it be the will of the people.”

Our conversation revisited an earlier meeting which I had with the Her Majesty. In noble magnanimity, His Majesty’s acceptance was truly humbling, his acceptance of my apologies. Being a guest of His Majesty at a Garden Party at Buckingham Palace two days later, we also extended and continued our cordial exchanges. It was embarrassing because the presentation line was about two in front of me, I was two rows behind, he broke the rank he was going through, went through the second one and came to me at the back in the third row and said hello and moved on.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my delegation also met with the Right Honourable Lord Benyon, the Minister of State for Climate, Environment and Energy and we focussed on our collective efforts to arrest the downward spiral of the climate crisis and sparing no effort in doing all that we can do to ensure human security. The meeting with the Speaker of the House of Commons, Mr. Lindsay Hoyle focussed on the role of the House, as you had reiterated this morning in your address to the visiting students. The role of the House on national governance and systems to ensure law making and the voice of the people are heard unhindered and sustained. Therein lies the fundamental principle and demonstration of what democracy is all about.

The eagerness with which the Office of the Speaker offered its support for Fiji’s Parliament in particular, and democracy as a whole, is truly heartening.

Day 3 started with a call, at Whitehall, on the Secretary of Defence, the Right Honourable Grant Shapps. Defence co-operation with external armed forces are also being reviewed and guided by the recent UK Integrated Review Refresh 2023. As a result of the review, the British Government recognises the need to forge stronger bonds in the Indo-Pacific region among other growing important focus in other regions.

The fact that the Secretary of Defence had served in the Royal Green Jackets, the parent Regiment or the founding regiment of that was the King's Royal Rifle Corps before it became the Royal Green Jackets and now the Rifle Brigade. It is where we inherited our rifle green and penny red colours - the regiment colours of the RFMF. Another history lesson for our students here this morning. There are prospects for increasing cooperation on this front and which this Government would like to take up.

In our exchange, it is very interesting that we live in a world that is getting smaller. My Company Commander when I was Company 2IC of A Company 1FIR here was Major John Bennett from the Royal Green Jackets. He went back and commanded that Battalion when he was on active service in Northern Ireland and he must have met with some of our students who had come out of Sandhurst at that time. John Bennett went back from here and became a Battalion Commander there and the Secretary of Defence served under Major John Bennett during that time in the military in UK.

The meeting with the Secretary of Defence was followed up on Day 4 with a visit to the Military Training Camp at Aldershot in Hampshire. Aldershot is known as the home of the British Army which currently has 2,000 active personnel from Fiji.

On arrival at Aldershot, we were met and received in the traditional ceremony of welcome from our countrymen who are serving in the Army. Close by, there was also a training camp which had restricted entry and I was allowed in where the Ukrainian soldiers were training in the UK. I was told that the Ukrainian soldiers will be training there, and I was surprised that before we went to the range, I was taken to a tent and I saw a *tanoa* and a group of Fijian soldiers in British uniform, waiting to present the *sevusevu*. When the young man brought a cup up to me, I saw his face and asked him quietly, "what is your name"? He looked around rather embarrassed and told me, "*O au o Toni*", and I told those who were with me that he is my father's namesake. It was a moment of pride for me to see our very own countrymen who are trainers in the joint warfare facility in that restricted access camp.

Seeing civilian Ukrainian women participating as interpreters on the training lines was a reminder that this is their fight, a national fight for survival. In the war that is going on, it is back to the 1st World War style of fight intense warfare again where the Ukrainians dug in because they cannot go anywhere else. It is their line of defence which is their front line and also their international boundary. Life expectancy in the front line measured in terms of hours, and not days, months or years.

That visit was followed by a call on the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, the Right-Honourable Patricia Scotland, at the historic Marlborough House. Marlborough House, honourable Members, and visiting students, was where they carried out the constitutional conferences that gave rise to our first constitution and the independence of Fiji.

The meeting focused on the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) which is to be held later this year in Samoa. We also discussed the mandate and activities of the Commonwealth Secretariat in assisting Member States on a whole range of programmes as they require and needed.

The Commonwealth currently has three programmes running in Fiji. The Commonwealth needs our imagination, our creativity and our cooperation. For a small team at the Secretariat, there is a lot that they are shouldering on our behalf. We have a small team of Fiji citizens in the Commonwealth Secretariat, and we were very proud to see them.

The next stop for my delegation, Sir, after that was the visit to the Secretary-General of the International Maritime Organization (IMO), Mr. Arsenio Antonio Dominguez Velasco. We heard of IMO's efforts in transitioning the shipping and maritime sector to be climate resilient while remaining commercially efficient and profitable in the emerging operating environment. As maritime States, this is of utmost importance to Fiji as we also endeavour to rebuild our ports, our shipbuilding, our slipway and maintenance capabilities, not only for our own sake, but also for the region.

Being accorded a briefing at the MI6 Headquarters of the British Intelligence Service, provided deeper understanding of the situations and the scenarios the British Government and her Allies are confronted with and which they are trying to manage.

The MI6 Briefing was an opportunity to share common experiences and insights with the Officials who were there. These can only be referred to as -

1. investments in our common goals for accountable government;
2. protection of the dignity of humankind; and
3. our shared responsibility in ensuring that evil has no place in our midst, while decency, peace and security are promoted and sustained.

The sharing of my concept for the Pacific as an "Ocean of Peace" found fertile ground there at MI6 also in England.

On Day 5, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had a meeting at Whitehall with the Secretary for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, Lord Cameron. I made a mistake of putting my hand out calling, "Hello David", he was the former Prime Minister. Then someone behind me said, "Lord Cameron.". Oh, Hello, Lord Cameron.

The meeting acknowledged the deep historical relations between our two countries. We looked into opportunities for furthering the relationship and our joint responsibilities as members of the Commonwealth in ensuring we remain strong and relevant.

I had made the same mistake at the COP28 when I met Tony Blair. I said, "hello Tony". The guy next to me said, "Sir Anthony". "Oh! I am sorry, Hello Sir Anthony."

There was focus on common challenges that we are facing and they are –

- the rise in autocracy;
- growing disregard for the international rules-based order;
- vulnerability of the global supply chain;
- the increase in transnational organized crime;
- illicit trafficking in people, drugs and goods (our newspaper is full of these accounts everyday);
- the place of development assistance; and
- need to be guided by the will of the people, among others.

There is recognition that the international environment is complex and perhaps, heading in the wrong direction, and if we allow it, it can get even worse.

The openness and willingness of the British Government to come to our assistance as needed, was very reassuring. As with other development partners, we do our part first before we reach out to our friends where help is needed.

Clearly Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is much work ahead emanating from that visit. At the official level, there was also a meeting with the Officials of the British Department of Trade, where the focus was on trade relations, particularly the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), Fiji's products and British market requirements and processes. A follow up meeting is on the horizon and there is an opportunity to dovetail this with CHOGM.

Mr. Speaker, there are over 20,000 Fijian Nationals living in the United Kingdom. Of that 20,000, over 2,000 serve as active members of the British Armed Forces.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with your permission I will hand this Statement to the Hansard Reporters where we can all have access to them as my time has run out.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Prime Minister on the Statement that he has given on the visit that he has paid to the United Kingdom. We are very glad to hear of all the various visits that he made. I was particularly struck with the rapport that he struck up with King Charles III in their visit because I can recall back in 2019 when we were in London with the former Prime Minister, we also visited him at that time with the invitation to be here at the 50th Anniversary of our Independence. It was unfortunate at that time, COVID-19 came, so it was not able to happen. So, I think that rapport and the relationship that he has expressed has been there for a long time between our two nations.

It is good to think back on history, but it is also important to realise that the history that we have talked about a lot of the times is the embellished history. Sometimes there are also the history that needs to be taught. There are other parts of history that are not spoken about at length, and we know that this is something that we also need to cherish. We can talk about the things that happened to the hill tribes of Fiji, et cetera.

These are the kind of things that are not covered in our full history, and I think it is important too for the children that are here to understand that sometimes, the history books that you read today do not tell you the full history of what transpired in our country. And that is something that I hope the Ministry of Education and others can look into because we really need to understand where we came from as a country, what the forces are because the things that impact on us today are the forces of what has happened in the past and they have their ramifications over the generations. But it is upon us as people today to look into acting on those things.

I would just like to pick on some of the issues that the honourable Prime Minister spoke about. I am very appreciative of the fact that they talked about with Lord Bennet, if I am correct, on the issue of climate change and we know that this is something that is important for us. I think one of the recent COPS that was held in the United Kingdom recently where His Majesty the King was involved in all of that. I am glad to hear that the notion of 'sparing no effort' came through. I am glad to hear that because that is something that is very important for us, especially when we talk about climate change.

The former Prime Minister used to talk about the differences between large countries when they talk to us in person or when they come to the Pacific and we meet them in international conferences. Sometimes, what they talk about begins to change and they look at their own interest. So, I am thankful that that expression came about. He used to refer to some of them at some time as the 'coalition of the selfish' when it came to look at the interest of small island nations. But I am the glad that, that has been talked about there.

I note, again, the expression by the honourable Prime Minister on what he had talked about the Oceans of Peace, and I am glad to hear this. I had expressed some concern on this earlier on this year, about Oceans of Peace and how it manifests in our approach to conflicts in other countries.

We also consider at the moment about some of the things that are taking place in New Caledonia. We are a bit of concerned about our people there, so maybe the Prime Minister might be wanting to prepare a Ministerial Statement on how we will be dealing with that particular situation. I was interested to hear whether there was any discussion on the visa free entry into the United Kingdom, but it seems that that it did not take place.

The other thing I am very glad to hear about is the visit to the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and the emphasis on Maritime Safety Security especially the Pacific Blue Shipping Partnership. I think this is very important for us. We need to show that we have reduced our emissions in our shipping in the Pacific but we have old fleets. I think the amount of money that is being talked about in this project is \$500 million and we hope the Government can continue to work very closely with the IMO to get that money into place so we can upgrade our ships.

We know we have had a lot of problems with shipping in our country and we are in a better state than a lot of those other countries. We look forward to the IMO regional office being established in Fiji, it will allow field level engagement, technical cooperation and allow us to express our wishes to them to work with them, so we can also as small island nations also try to decarbonize our shipping fleets. It is a big, big task but we have to go there, we have to show the world if we are moving, asking you to do something for climate change by reducing emissions here in the Pacific, we will also work on that but we need the assistance, and I thank the honourable Prime Minister for the visits and we look forward to being able to move this Pacific Blue Shipping Partnership forward for the benefit of the shipping of decarbonizing for shipping fleets in the Pacific.

Duke of Edinburgh International Awards Programme

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, students at the public gallery, viewers who are watching through television broadcasting live from the comfort zone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today with great pride to address this esteemed Parliament regarding a momentous occasion that transpired just days ago. On Wednesday, 15th May, 2024, the Ministry of Youth and Sports had the distinct honour of investing ten outstanding youths as Gold Awardees for the Duke of Edinburgh Awards programme at the State House. The auspicious occasion was officiated by His Excellency the President of Fiji, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere. His presence and support further underscores the significance of this achievement and serves as a source of inspiration for our young awardees.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Duke of Edinburgh Awards programme founded by His Royal Highness The Duke of Edinburgh in 1956 has been a beacon of excellence, character development and service for countless young individuals across the globe. It is a programme deeply rooted in the principles of self-improvement, community engagement and personal growth. The programme has a rich history in Fiji, dating back to the 1960s however, since 1999, this only marks the third Gold Award event recorded bringing the number to a total of 77 Gold Awardees nationally. Since its inception, the programme has empowered thousands of young Fijians to explore their potential, develop essential life skills and contribute positively to society.

Participants between the ages of 15 years to 24 years engage in a variety of activities across four key areas: service, skills, physical recreation and adventurous journey. These experiences foster

personal growth, self-reliance and a sense of responsibility. The programme is implemented mostly in schools and in youth clubs.

On Achievements, in recognising the efforts of the 10 youths and investing them into the Gold level is a privilege as it exemplifies the very essence of this prestigious programme. They have demonstrated unwavering commitment, resilience and a spirit of adventure through their journey which culminated in achieving the highest accolade, the Gold Award.

Each of these remarkable individuals have traversed a challenging and transformative path, encompassing four key components: volunteering, physical fitness, skills development and adventurous journey. Their dedication to these pillars reflect not only their personal ambition but also their profound sense of duty to their communities and society at large.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the achievements of these 10 youths are not merely a testament to their individual capabilities but also a reflection of our nation's commitment to nurturing the next generation of leaders, innovators and global citizens. As custodians of their potential, it is incumbent upon us to provide unwavering support and encouragement as they embark on the next chapter of their journey.

From 2021 to 2023, a total of 1,120 participants registered for the Duke of Edinburgh International Award (DEIA). Among them we have:

- 463 participants successfully graduated at the Bronze level.
- 115 participants achieved the Silver Award.
- 77 participants received the Prestigious Gold Award.

The progress has been slow given that the Ministry was officially granted an official operating license in 2017 to implement the DEIA programme in Fiji. The progress was further impacted by COVID 19 pandemic due to the restrictions put in place.

With the Programme, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the realm of volunteering, our Gold Awardees have selflessly dedicated hundreds of hours to various initiatives ranging from environmental conservation projects to mentoring disadvantaged youth. Their altruism and compassion have left an indelible mark on those they serve, inspiring others to follow in their footsteps.

Moreover, their commitment to physical recreation has not only fostered personal well-being but has also promoted a culture of health and vitality within their communities. Whether through sports, dance, or outdoor activities, these individuals have embodied the importance of an active lifestyle and its positive impact on both physical and mental health.

Equally impressive is their pursuit of skills development, as they have honed talents ranging from Culinary Arts to Digital Literacy. Through continuous learning and skill-building, our Gold Awardees have equipped themselves with the tools necessary to thrive in an ever-evolving world, while also contributing their expertise to the betterment of society.

Furthermore, the adventurous journeys undertaken by these trailblazers have not only tested their physical endurance but have also cultivated invaluable life skills such as teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving. From traversing rugged terrain to navigating uncharted waters, they have embraced the spirit of adventure with courage and determination.

Implementation: Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure the programme's effectiveness, the Ministry plans to establish a dedicated team that will focus on:

1. Proper implementation - We will provide the guidance and support to schools, clubs and participants to ensure consistent and high quality implementation.
2. Monitoring and evaluation - Rigorous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms will help us assess impacts, identify areas for improvement and celebrate success.
3. Addressing unreachable areas - We recognise that some regions may face challenges in accessing the programme. Our team will explore innovative solutions to bridge these gaps.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Youth and Sports is committed to expanding the reach of Duke of Edinburgh International Award programme as part of its Strategic Plan as we recognise the transformative impact it can have on our youth. To realise the full potential of this programme, the Ministry will focus on the following:

1. Inclusion in schools - We are actively working with the Ministry of Education to integrate the programme into schools across Fiji. By doing so, we aim to provide every student with the opportunity to participate and grow.
2. Inclusion in youth clubs - We encourage more youth clubs to take ownership of the programme. These clubs serve as hubs for personal development, mentorship and community engagement.
3. Collaboration with key Ministries and stakeholders - Our vision extends beyond individual participation. We seek to collaborate with other Ministries and stakeholders to reach a wider spectrum of youth, aged 15 years to 24 years. Together, we can create a holistic approach to youth development.
4. Boys Scouts and Girl Guides – In alignment with our commitment to youth development, the Ministry of Youth and Sports is mandated to support the Boys Scouts and Girl Guides. These esteemed organisations share many core values with the Duke of Edinburgh Awards programmes, such as leadership, community and personal development. We recognise the complementary roles these programmes play in fostering well-rounded individuals who are prepared to meet the challenges of tomorrow. To this end, the Ministry, as part of its Strategic Plan, will work closely with these organisations to strengthen the Boys Scouts and Girl Guides programme across the nation. This plan includes sourcing funding for training and resources, enhancing collaboration between these organisations and schools and promoting greater participation through public awareness campaigns.

By bolstering these programmes, we aim to provide a comprehensive support system for our youth, ensuring that they have ample opportunities to develop their skills, building character and serve their communities. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we celebrate the achievements of our Gold awardees, let us also reaffirm our commitment to nurturing the potential of all our young people through diverse and enriching programmes. By investing in their growth and development, we are laying the foundation for a brighter and more prosperous future for our nation.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to highlight that there is a great interest in the DEIA Programme, as seen through the steady increase in the number of participants enrolling in the programme for the last three years. We would greatly need an increase in resources to strengthen this programme and realise its full potential. The high number of Bronze graduates indicates successful engagement at the entry level and the smaller cohort of silver and gold awardees reflects the Programme's challenging nature, emphasizing quality over quantity.

Mr. Speaker, last but not least, I wish to extend my heartfelt congratulations to each of our Gold Awardees for their exceptional accomplishments and commendable dedication to the ideals of the Duke of Edinburgh Awards Programme.

To our stakeholders, parents and the staff of the Ministry of Youth and Sports and Ministry of Education, for their unwavering commitment towards the development of youth in Fiji. May these achievements serve as a source of inspiration to all young people across our nation, reminding them that with perseverance, dedication, and a spirit of service, anything is possible.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for his Statement on this very wonderful programme the Duke of Edinburgh Awards.

At the outset, I join him in offering our congratulations to the Gold Awardees of this programme. The programme, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is also cut around the idea that not all learnings happen inside the classroom. It can also happen outside the classroom and those four categories – Service, Skills, Physical Recreation and Adventurous Journey, in some way, moves that learning outside from the classroom setting.

I usually teach the Duke of Edinburgh and I think it was more on the skill set - it was on safety of life at sea. It is a wonderful programme and if you look at the four categories - Service, Skills, Physical Recreation and Adventurous Journey, we can be creative enough and set up a programme where you have a little bit of each, for example.

In that programme, we would get the students who are part of it, teach them how to inflate a life raft if they are on a ship, how to ride the life raft if it turns over, how to send SOS messages in different ways that you can attract attention, how to fire flairs if you find them inside. It was quite interesting and the students that came in and were part of this programme had a little bit of both. They were enhancing their skills - a bit of adventure, we would take them out to sea, et cetera.

I think in progressing it forward and advertising it so the kids who get into it create those programmes that have a little bit of each. Also, I think that Fiji as a maritime nation, skill set that really targets where they live. I am sure if we ask the students who would want to go down and do all those – inflate a life raft, how do you put on a life jacket, how do you swim, how do you help someone who is struggling out at sea with a life jacket, I am sure they would raise their hands and say, “yes, I would want to go and do it”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also think that there is an age group. So, you start the programme in school and then you leave school at about 19 years. In some cases, they do not continue, but because the programme caters from 14 years to 24 years, if we can keep track of them and push them into a club may be, then they can continue and be a gold awardee in the end. A wonderful achievement for those who had done that.

I think also, Mr. Speaker, that it is worth thinking about is the funding to the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Youth and Sports. They need money in order to run this programme. Also, they can partner with outside organisations, such as the Fiji Navy, for example, if they want to run that programme. There needs to be funding also so that they can be able to run that programme.

I thank the Ministry for continuing with that. I wish the programme well and I wish all the students, those who are here, those who are listening well. It is a wonderful opportunity to pick up and join and be part of the Duke of Edinburgh Award.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I intend to adjourn Parliament now for tea and when we resume, I will hand over the floor to the Attorney-General for him to make his Statement.

In the meantime, we will adjourn for tea, and students and those in the gallery are invited to join the Members of Parliament in the Big Committee Room for refreshment.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.31 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.07 a.m.

Transformative Changes in the Judicial System

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of this august Parliament, I welcome the students from Yat Sen School who are seated in the gallery and members of the public who are joining us virtually through the livestream media; good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my topic this morning is on the Transformative Changes in the Judiciary, Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) and the Office of Legal Aid. The integrity and effectiveness of a judicial system is paramount to the health of our democracy and wellbeing of our society.

The Judicial Department, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Legal Aid Commission are the pillars that uphold justice, ensure the rule of law and provide access to legal resources for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministerial Statement this morning will focus on the current status, the achievements, the areas necessitating improvements in the following institutions - the Judicial Department, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Legal Aid Commission. At the same time, I will also provide a comparative analysis of the leadership and progress within these institutions over the past 16 years, highlighting the transformative changes brought about under the Coalition Government.

The Judicial Department includes the Judiciary, Magistracy and the various Tribunals namely, the Small Claims Tribunal and the Court support staff. The Chief Justice looks after the Judiciary, the Chief Magistrate oversees the Magistracy and the Small Claims Tribunal, while the Chief Registrar manages the Court support staff while also serving as the Department's Chief Accounting Officer.

The Judicial Department has branches across Fiji with its main office in Suva, and they also have an office in Lautoka and Labasa. Suva is the home of Supreme Court and the Court of Appeal, while the High Courts are also looked in Suva, Labasa and Lautoka.

The High Court convenes in each of these three main centres. There are 36 established Magistrates Courts with further scheduled island sittings occurred during the year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the previous Government, this was not the case. In fact, the structure heavily relied on expatriate Judicial Officers, resulting in increased costs due to allowance, gratuity and travel expenses.

Mr. Speaker Sir, a great number of visiting Judges for the Supreme Court and Court of Appeal were Sri Lankans. This led to high travel costs. Fortunately, when the Coalition Government came into power, we prioritised localization, significantly increasing the number of local Judicial Officers from 27 to 50, thereby reducing dependency on expatriates and associated costs.

Under the previous Administration, the Judicial workforce included 55 officers. These were 27 local Judges and 28 expatriates. We have further expanded this and we shift to include 59 officers with a strong focus on local appointments. As a result, we now have 50 local officers and nine expatriates serving in key positions. This shift promotes sustainability and, of course, reduces costs. The total number of established staff has increased from 852 to 886, showcasing a commitment to strengthening the Judicial capacity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the appointment of Judges from Australia and New Zealand has reduced travel costs by one-third. I am proud to say that we have increased the frequency of Supreme Court sittings from three to four sessions, and the Court of Appeal sittings from four to five sessions with back-to-back sittings, enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of our Judicial processes. These advancements underscore our commitment to building a resilient and sustainable judicial system that effectively addresses the evolving needs of our nation. Through these efforts, we are fostering a more just, equitable and accessible legal system for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there was a critical area of improvement in case management. Under the previous Government, the number of pending cases was alarmingly high. There were 26,162 pending cases in total - 13,586 pending cases in the Central/Eastern Division; 10,402 pending cases in the Western Division alone; and 2,174 pending cases in the Northern Division.

Since the Coalition Government came in, these numbers have significantly decreased by 9,221. There are 10,675 pending cases in the Central/Eastern Division; 4,758 pending cases in the Western Division; and 1,520 cases in the Northern Division, so 16,941 pending cases in total. This improvement, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is because of enhanced case management meetings and the Chief Justice's direct engagement with all Courts nationwide.

The budget of the Judicial Department has been notably increased from \$47,152,415 to \$50,448,711 under the Coalition Government. This increase has facilitated various capital projects, including the construction of the new Court complexes and the refurbishment of existing facilities to better serve the needs of our citizens.

In the pipeline for the 2024-2025 Budget are several noteworthy projects, as follows:

1. We are embarking on the extension of the Nadi Court – one of the busiest courts in Fiji, a crucial step in expanding the judicial capacity in that region.
2. We are proud to announce the construction of a new Lautoka Court complex which will provide modern facilities to support the administration of justice. In 2012, there was a ceremony for the construction of the Lautoka complex. Until today, there has been no action, so we have implemented it.
3. We are moving forward with the establishment of a new court complex in key locations across the country. This include the Savusavu Court complex, Keiyasi Court, Dreketi Court and the Veiuto Court. These new facilities will not only improve access to justice, but also ensure that our judicial processes are conducted in a state-of-the-art environment.

In addition to these constructions, we also continue our efforts to upgrade existing court complexes. This includes ongoing work at the Ba Court Complex which will be opened at the end of the year and the Lautoka Tagimoucia Court. These upgrades are essential in modernizing our infrastructure and improving the quality of service we provide to the public.

I am pleased to announce plans for the establishment of the High Court 12 and High Court 13 at Government Buildings. These additions will further strengthen the Judiciary and ensure that justice is accessible to all.

Shifting our focus – I would like to shed light on some of the systematic issues encountered by the office of Director of Public Prosecution during the previous Government's tenure. Mr. Speaker, Sir, imagine a scenario where fairness is merely a concept, where advancement is an elusive

dream and where bureaucracy reigns supreme. These were the reality faced by our prosecutors. The unequal workload distribution among prosecutors, some were burdened with more case that they could not handle while others had their desk gathering dust. How can justice prevail when the scales are so clearly tipped, I asked.

The shifting management culture that unshackled the aspirations of our local prosecutors. They were held back, unable to rise beyond the Principal Legal Officer level. Where is the encouragement for growth and excellence in such an environment? The Human Resources Department, far removed from the courtroom, seizes control of the prosecutorial duties. How can those unfamiliar with the law understand the complexities of our work? It is an insult to our profession.

Imagine the despair of prosecutors toiling away in neglected workspaces, devoid of care and respect they deserve. How can we expect dedication and passion where the very spaces in which they work are disregarded? These issues created a toxic and unhealthy work environment, affecting morale and productivity.

Since the Coalition Government came into power, we have transformed and revitalized the ODPP. A change in leadership and management has brought renewed strength, vitality and courage to the work lives of the prosecutors. Even amid a stagnant budget for the past four years, they have shown remarkable resilience. Now, they are advocating for a \$2 million boost in the 2025 budget to finance the establishment of new specialized units, additional staff positions and enhanced training programmes.

For office renovations and strategic planning, the neglected conditions in divisional offices have been addressed. Its Nadi office completed renovations in October 2023 with modern facilities costing \$73,755. The Lautoka office renovations are ongoing with a budget of \$116,000, Labasa office renovations began in May 2024, moving to a higher floor to prevent flooding with a budget of \$49,500.

A comprehensive strategic plan developed with senior officers will be launched in June. The training programme has been revamped to include external stakeholder engagement and overseas opportunities, addressing current crime trends. Funded by external sources, the training covers cybercrime, child development, asset recovery and leadership. Since 2023, 14 prosecutors have attended overseas training with significant national training events scheduled.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us acknowledge the indispensable role of the Legal Aid Commission. The Legal Aid Commission stands as a beacon of hope for those who cannot afford legal representation. It provides invaluable services, including legal advice, representation in court and assistance across family, criminal and civil domains.

The Legal Aid Commission embarked on a transformative journey, spearheading initiatives to enhance accountability, transparency and service accessibility. Restructuring its organisational framework through compilation of its annual report from 2018 to 2023 and the review of key policies. These include the Finance Manual 2022, Financial Policy (Fixed Assets Management Policy), Transport Policy, Human Resources Policy and Procedural Manual 2023, implemented in March of last year following extensive consultation.

The Commission aimed to streamline processes, develop career pathways and foster internal growth. This overhaul was important to meet the evolving needs of its clientele and ensure operational efficiency.

The Commission embarked on a digital transformation journey integrating modern tools for streamline operation enhance service delivery. Additionally, strategic partnership and exchange programmes with Pacific Island countries underscore the Commission's commitment to regional collaboration and knowledge sharing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to share comprehensive update on the transformative initiatives taken by the Legal Aid Commission. These efforts are designed to enhance accountability, transparency, service delivery and access to justice for all Fijians. The Commission has strengthened its accountability and transparency through compilation of its Annual Report and of course all the policies of the Commission.

In December 2023, the Legal Aid Commission launched a new Strategic Plan for 2023 to 2026, it was developed through an extensive consultation process. This plan focuses on client service, collaboration with the justice system, organisational sustainability and fostering a positive culture within the Legal Aid Commission.

The Legal Aid Commission has initiated exchange programme with Pacific Island countries as exemplified by the MOU with the Solomon Islands Public Prosecution Office, similar agreements with PNG, Vanuatu and Kiribati are forthcoming.

The Commission has improved accessibility to Legal Aid services by enhancing this office accessibility for persons with special needs. These includes the relocation of the Conflict Unit and the Navua Office and securing a new, more accessible space for the Nausori Office. To streamline service delivery the Commission has simplified the Legal Aid Commission representation application from 16 pages to just four pages ensuring it is use of friendly and also decentralised and digitised civil litigation procedures.

The launch of the Legal Awareness Programmes at secondary schools reaching 6,346 students from Year 13 to Year 17 across 17 high schools. This proactive approach in crime prevention will be further supported by the upcoming MOU with the Ministry of Education.

On 1st May, 2024, the Legal Aid Commission has streamlined the types of civil contest measure they handle focussing on the specific area such as eviction, the SET appeals, enforcement proceedings and others to ensure efficient use of the time and limited resources.

Of July 2023 they conducted a first workshops for lawyers especially dealing with child representation, in family and domestic violence matters, in collaboration with the Judiciary. The team at the Commission are holding regular consultation with key stakeholders to improve service delivery and efficiency including meeting the Judiciary, Statutory Bodies, NGOs such as Fiji Women's Rights Movement for gender sensitization training.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these initiatives marks given progress for the Legal Aid Commission. We are committed to continuing our efforts, to ensure justice and legal representation for all Fijians, overcoming challenges, assisting opportunities to build a fairer and more accessible legal system. As we look to the future, let us remain steadfast in our dedication to justice, equality and the rule of law.

Together, we will build a justice team that only upholds the high standards of integrity and fairness but also serve as a pillar of strength and hope for all citizens. Our journey towards a more just society continues and with unwavering resolve, we will achieve our vision of a Judiciary that truly reflects the values and aspirations of our nation.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I offer the floor to the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate for their response. Honourable Members, this is another batch of students, Years 11,12 and 13 (if I am right) from Yat Sen Secondary School once more, welcome students.

We are humbly honoured to welcoming you to your Parliament. This is the People's Parliament and this is where we make laws, we change and amend laws and repeal laws as well and even treaties. That is our core functions. We hope to see that you are encouraged more and hope to see you in probably a couple of years' time, sitting amongst us or sitting amongst the honourable Members here, participating in serving your country. Thank you very much for taking the opportunity.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver a response, in response to the honourable Attorney-General's Ministerial Statement this morning. From the outset, it is a desperate attempt by the honourable Attorney-General to save his job. He has not been performing in the last few months, 17 months in the Government. He is trying to make a comparative analysis of what the previous government has done in the last 16 years. It is just a poor attempt from the honourable Attorney-General.

All the improvements that he had talked about this morning, in terms of Judiciary, Legal Aid and the Office of the Director of Public Prosecution are just continuing works of what the FijiFirst Government has done in the last few years. He just needs to take it forward. It was useless to come to Parliament and try to run down the previous administration. I think he has to learn from what the honourable Prime Minister told us yesterday, that he visited the former Prime Minister in prison. I think it is all about compassionate leadership and moving forward. You should not be stuck in the past if you really want to make some improvements in the portfolios that you have been given.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the FijiFirst Government, legal access through the Legal Aid Commission, I think the FijiFirst Government had developed Legal Aid Commission. It was unprecedented. It opened up offices in Nabouwalu, Taveuni and in areas where people can access. Last December, the honourable Attorney-General had a workshop trying to open up offices in Lomaiviti, Rotuma and other places. It is good for legal access. He had talked about other areas in Dreketi, we also welcome that. His speech today was comparing speed and quality.

While the FijiFirst was there, there was quality. If you bring speed in to delivering and clearing the backlog in our cases, you just have to visit the prison. He is also the Minister responsible for Corrections. Just visit our Remand Centre, people are still waiting for appeals and dates. That shows our Corrections Centre in Suva is overcrowded, even convicted criminals in the prison waiting for two years to get an appeal date. These are some of the things that the honourable Attorney-General needs to look into.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the FijiFirst Government, the Office of the DPP developed a Serious Fraud Unit, Human Trafficking Unit, Child Protection Division and it also developed to separated legal and administrative work. Those are the developments that have been done, you just need to take it forward, honourable Attorney-General and stop trying to compare the performance of the past government with what you need to do. You need to focus on what needs to be done.

I think some of their appointments too have been brought in the limelight that had been inconsistent with the 2013 Constitution. I will not lament on that because I cannot talk about the issues that are before the courts. I think Cabinet has already asked for an interpretation and I hope that those things will be brought to be consistent with the Constitution.

I hope that when the interpretation comes out, the honourable Attorney-General still keeps

his job. Hearing from what the people are saying in the social media and mainstream media, they are talking about the weaknesses and the poor performance of the Coalition Government. You should take this on board because it will help improve the work that you need to do.

As I have said, the previous Government has done a lot for the nation, for the Judiciary, for Legal Aid Commission and the Courts and access to justice. The Coalition Government just needs to take it forward and stop trying to run down the previous government. That is all I have to respond to the honourable Attorney-General this morning, and I hope he grows up and stops acting like a child when he comes to this honourable Parliament.

(Laughter)

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Update on the Refurbishment of the Ba Mission Hospital (Question No. 55/2024)

HON. P.D. KUMAR asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection inform Parliament on the progress of the refurbishment of the Ba Mission Hospital, for which a grant of \$710,801 was allocated in the current financial year?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Member for the question. I would like to wish all students, including our students in the Chambers today, a very good first day at school for the second term, and I wish you all well.

The Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection, Mr. Speaker, Sir, administers services and programmes aimed at ensuring that senior citizens in Fiji are supported to live a life of dignity, and this includes providing care for the elderly residents at our three Golden Age Homes across the country located in Suva, Lautoka and Labasa.

As a brief background, the structural condition of the more than 80 years old Golden Age in Lautoka, has deteriorated significantly and is in urgent need of repair. In light of the above it was decided that the Ba Mission Hospital be renovated to temporarily accommodate the residents and carers, while the Ministry renovates the age-old property. And to this end, a grant of \$710,801 was allocated in this financial year for the renovation of the Ba Mission Hospital.

However, Mr. Speaker, and for the information of honourable Members, at the beginning of the financial year, the Ministry was advised by the Methodist Church of Fiji who are the owners of the Ba Mission Hospital, that there were alternate plans for the property. So, due to time constraints and the urgency of the project, the Ministry with assistance of the Provincial Administrator (PA) in Ba, worked on identifying an alternative site. Please, note we have explored other alternatives referred by the Board Chairperson of the Home and, unfortunately, those sites were neither available nor suitable for the residents.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry, through PA Ba, now has managed to secure an alternative property, and will be moving the residents and carers to Matanakilagi House which is owned by Ba Provincial Holding Company Limited, and we would like to thank Ba Provincial Holding Company Limited for this partnership. The Ministry has signed this letting agreement from 30th April this year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Matanakilagi House needs to be renovated to meet the needs of accommodating our elderly. The renovation works will be undertaken by the Divisional Engineer West (DEW) under the Ministry of Public Works at a cost of \$341,835.

The Ministry of Finance has approved the diversion of the fund from its initial intention, which is the renovation of the Ba Mission Hospital to the renovation of the Matanakilagi House. At present, the Ministry awaits the request to incur expenditure under RIE for the release of funds to the Divisional Engineer West, who has advised that the refurbishment of Matanakilagi House will take about eight weeks. Once Matanakilagi House is refurbished, the residents and carers will then be moved to allow for works on the restructure of the current site to take place. On that note, I would also like to confirm to this Parliament that consultations are also underway for the restructure of the Golden Age Home in Lautoka.

Mr. Speaker, as I conclude my response, I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to the dedicated members of the Board of Visitors for the Golden Age Homes. Their unwavering commitment and tireless efforts in ensuring the wellbeing and care of our elderly residents do not go unnoticed. A special thanks to Mr. Kanti Punja, Mr. Abinesh Chand, Mrs. Rajneesh Charan, Mr. Vinesh Chandra, Ms. Yvonne Lagilevu, Mr. Selwa Nand, Ms. Shivali Kashyap, Mrs. Marica Rokovada Hallacy and Mr. Rajesh Patel, for their outstanding leadership and service. Your invaluable contribution are truly commendable and have made a significant difference in the lives of our senior citizens. Thank you for your dedication and commitment to our Gold Age Homes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the problem with this Government. They have allocated the money for a particular task, year is about to end, and no action taken on the ground. But when the budget is read, it is made to sound it is so good, everything will happen according to the delivery, but we know the implementation of various things that were stated in the budget has not been realized.

MR. SPEAKER.- You have only 30 seconds left.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Therefore, honourable Minister, you were saying that it will take eight weeks to complete. Initially, we were told that people will be moving to St. Thomas, now some other place. How sure are you that this project will be completed within this budget?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Member for those comments, but I do want to share some history on how the Golden Age Home in Lautoka was handled by the previous Government. It is most unfortunate that at the time when I came in as the Minister, my predecessor had actually given the order for the elderly in the Golden Age Home in Lautoka because it was not inhabitable, to be moved to Labasa. It became very impractical, and the dislocation or displacement of our elderly are to be close to their families, as well as the staff would need to be relocated and moved away from their own homes too in Lautoka to Labasa in Vanualevu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, perhaps, just to shed some light, these things take time and also to look for suitable locations, but it has to be in Lautoka, it has to be in the Ba Province so that families can continue to visit their family members. They need assistance - the medical assistance as well as emotional support. That is why it has taken time, and we are very grateful to the *vanua* and the people of Ba for letting us use the Matanakilagi House because it has to be fitted properly so that we can take care of our elderly residents.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the question here is about the process of allocating funds. In simple project management, there are cycles of project management - initiation,

implementation and then the close up. My question to you is how and who is responsible in terms of doing the work in which Government has given the funds but there was no clear direction as to what will the funds be utilised for? Allocation has been provided but preliminary work should have been satisfied before the allocation of funds to be given has not taken place. Who is responsible and why was this taken by the Ministry responsible?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition. As I had mentioned, when the allocation was made in the budget, we had already had an MOU with the Methodist Church of Fiji. So, we had gone through the preliminary process to ensure that Ba Mission Hospital was suitable for the relocation. So, we were counting on that relationship that had already been established with the Methodist Church. But it is most unfortunate that they have reneged on this agreement for their own purposes. They have other plans for the property, Mr. Speaker, so we were literally left out in the cold to find another location.

It is not easy to find properties in that area or even in the province, especially when it comes to the needs of the elderly because they have to be fitted out specifically and this takes some works that are usually outside of the usual construction. So, it took time to find an alternative location. We scouted a few and then we were able to secure Matanakilagi House.

Yes, honourable Leader of the Opposition, we did go through the process when we applied for the funding in the last budget, based on that MOU and agreement with Ba Mission Hospital which also came to Cabinet. Unfortunately, we had to deal with that situation, but we will certainly commit to our elderly in Lautoka that we will not relocate them to locations so far where they are away, like Labasa.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to know from the honourable Minister, given the original purpose for the funds been diverted to something else, in that process of awarding the funds, was a proper tender process utilised?

HON. L.D. TABUYA. – Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, when I came into the Ministry, this discussion with the Ba Mission Hospital was going back and forth with the previous Government.

In fact, we were told that the Ba Mission Hospital was secured but then the Minister at that time felt and made the decision that they be relocated to Labasa, even though there was already that MOU in place with Ba Mission Hospital. So, coming into the Ministry, that was already in place. So, the process had already been done by the previous Government and my predecessor.

The decision that was taken to move them to Labasa, in my opinion, was taken in haste, not considering the circumstances, as well as the emotional circumstances surrounding, even consulting our elderly as well as the staff. As I have said, coming into it we were prepared to work with Ba Mission Hospital as we proceeded but within the number of months on that faith, we applied for the budget but as you know, what happened after that did not happen.

HON. J. USAMATE. - The tender process?

HON. L.D. TABUYA. – On the relocation to Matanakilagi House? Yes, it is currently underway.

The question, of course, on the relocation to Matanakilagi House, as I had mentioned, all project processes are being followed and you can ask that in the next budget, perhaps, if you have any issues.

MR. SPEAKER. – Thank you. That is the last supplementary question, honourable Bala. We will move on to the second Oral Question for today.

Sustainable Development Priorities
(Question No. 56/2024)

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics update Parliament on the Whole of Government approach in achieving the Sustainable Development Priorities?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD. - Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Assistant Minister for his question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this question itself, perhaps, would require a broader Ministerial Statement but very briefly, I want to say that the achievement and progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by way of background, when we started with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) where there were eight goals focused on reducing poverty, providing housing, health and education, environmental sustainability in those 15 years and in anticipation of the end of the MDGs, the United Nations adopted the SDGs and, obviously, most countries including Fiji, signed the United Nations Agenda 2030 in 2015. Of course, for any country, that itself is a Whole of Government approach. No country could achieve the SDGs without having a whole of country approach.

The SDGs, Mr. Speaker, Sir, compared to the MDGs are more ambitious. They address a much broader set of concerns and emphasises the links between global goals, national targets and national agenda. So, as part of the Government's approach, we embrace a very comprehensive approach involving the entire Government and the inter-connected economic, social and environmental pillars of the 2030 agenda necessitate collaboration between different Government ministries.

If I could just very quickly lay out the different Ministries that are responsible as focal points to coordinate this whole of Government approach would provide some information for the honourable Members in Parliament with respect to how this is being done. This was demonstrated in our most recent 2023 Voluntary National Review Report which was presented by the honourable Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs at the United Nations. That report was very well received. The focal points for each SDG (17 goals) as compared to 8 under the Millennium Development Goals.

1. SDG1 – Eradicating Poverty comes under the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection.
2. SDG2 – Zero Hunger comes under the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways,
3. SDG3 – Health and Well-being comes under Ministry of Health
4. SDG4 – Quality Education comes under Ministry of Education
5. SDG5 – Gender Equality comes under Ministry of Women
6. SDG6 – Clean Water and Sanitation comes under Ministry of Public Works
7. SDG7 – Affordable and Clean Energy comes under Ministry of Public Works
8. SDG8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth comes under Ministry of Finance,
9. SDG9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure comes under Ministry of Trade and Co-operatives.
10. SDG10 - Reduced Inequalities comes under Ministry of Women

11. SDG11 – Sustainable cities and communities comes under Ministry of Housing and Local Government
12. SDG12 – Responsible consumption and production comes under Ministry of Trade and Cooperatives.
13. SDG13 – Climate Action comes under the Office of the Prime Minister
14. SDG14 – Life Below Water comes under the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry.
15. SDG15 – Life on Land comes under the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry.
16. SDG16 – Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions comes under Ministry of Justice and the Office of the Attorney-General.
17. SDG17 – Partnership for the Goals comes under the Office of the Prime Minister and Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in that way, in accordance with the national priorities, I will just also name a few ministries, particularly, the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection is actively involved in sporting programmes that have a goal of reducing poverty. But again, reducing poverty, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a whole of government approach. That is a focal point and that ministry's mandate is to work with all the other ministries. Then we have the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways, Ministry of Health, SDG13 – the importance of climate action. Again, the importance of addressing SDG13 falls under the Office of the Prime Minister and that gives us a lot of synergy, influence and power to be able to promote SDG13 because it reflects the Coalition Government's highest attention to SDG13.

We are very pleased that some of the actions that we have taken over the last 17 months, not only in terms of accessing climate finance and looking at various projects, the influence and the leadership of the Prime Minister has given different ministries a much better influence and leeway in terms of negotiating some of the broader project-based activities under different development goals.

The Whole of the Government approach, Mr. Speaker, Sir, emphasizes the collective contribution of all the stakeholders in achieving the SDGs. I could provide the whole list of stakeholders that are engaged. But let me also assure Parliament that the new National Development Plan will itself be a holistic approach to achieving the UN SDG Priorities and each sector of the new National Development Plan will align the Whole of Government commitment to the SDGs for future that is inclusive and prosperous and environmentally responsible.

Just in terms of the National Development Plan, the nationwide public consultation was held over 300 locations around the nation with a record number of more than 21,000 people being consulted who had the opportunity to talk about the plan, exchange their ideas and the depth of analysis and collaborative nature of the Government ministries participation in the process, focussing on the SDGs has been quite defining. We are very pleased, and I am sure when the final plan comes out, it will also support this idea of holistic Government approach to achieving Sustainable Development Goals.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you to honourable Professor Biman Prasad for his speech. Honourable Minister, the UNDP just recently issued a report which we were all quite privy to. This report basically said that the Pacific region and also the rest of the world was not on track to deliver any of the Sustainable Development Goals by the targeted 2030. Now it has been put to 2065 (I think). Have you, honourable Minister to ensure that we are not only doing this so that we do comply but are we doing things at breakneck speed so that we are compliant bearing in mind also that there is a climate change perspective to this and climate change issues are at the forefront for all the Pacific Island countries. I understand that there is a lot of stuff that needs to be attended to but what we want to know is, has this report been an integral part of your thinking....

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, sorry to be cutting you off the time has

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Sir, I had 15 seconds left.

MR. SPEAKER.- No.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- That is my question, I think he understands that.

MR. SPEAKER.- No, no, I have not allowed that, the time for him to ask that question has lapsed. So, we will go on to the next one. Any supplementary questions? Please you abide by the time that we have set there.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, very good that we have the framework but implementation, pragmatism in the implementation is what is important. I have served in Committees.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- What did you do about that?

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- There is only one SDG that all Government ministries sort of concentrated on and that is SDG5. My question is, the cross-cutting issues, particularly handling resilient cities, climate change, et cetera. How is this being handled and how will you ensure that this trickles down to the very lowest level of implementation?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- 16 years, did nothing.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I think that is pretty obvious, Mr. Speaker, that is understood that the implementation and bringing the cross-cutting issues together and putting it in a strategic framework so that all the different Government ministries are able to see where the focus is. It is not always easy to do that but as I said, the National Development Plan is really cutting through different ministries.

As we said, the reason why we have 3-year, 5-year and 20-year Development Plans is because we think that there are some basics that needs to be done as quickly as possible and we are looking at three years. Then there are things that immediately beyond basics may take five years or a little bit more. So that is how we are looking at implementation and I agree with the honourable Leader of the Opposition, implementation in anything you do, any project, any plan is critical.

On the point that honourable Koya was trying to make, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the issue of not meeting the targets. That is pretty obvious, again, COVID-19, environmental exigencies, existential threats has disrupted the original UN Agenda in 2015 to actually achieve certain SDGs in a specific period of time. Even the United Nations admits, Mr. Speaker, Sir, throughout the world, no country is actually on track to achieve all the SDGs partly because of COVID-19, partly because of what is happening globally in terms of conflicts and extreme climate events. So, we have to as a country make sure that we prioritise.

We cannot have the resources for everything that we do. No country ever has that and so the important thing for us as a Government is to make sure that we put priority. I pointed out certain Ministries - Ministry of Health, Ministry of Women, Poverty and Social Protection and Ministry of Public Works are some key priorities that we have to focus on, even if we do not achieve fully the goals, we are actually making a progress towards it.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, can the honourable Minister inform Parliament where

is the National Development Plan which he has just mentioned?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Obviously, the honourable Member has not been listening. It is all over the country. We have said so many times here in Parliament and outside of Parliament that the National Development Plan would be completed by the end of this month. We gave the timeline and it is ridiculous for him to come here and waste Parliament's time asking a stupid question, when is the plan going to be ready when it is all out there, publicly stated, approved timeline in Parliament. This is the level of questions and debates coming from them. Completely bogus, Mr. Speaker!

Dental and Allied Health Professionals Salary Anomalies
(Question No. 57/2024)

HON. P. K. RAVUNAWA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services inform Parliament on its plans to review salary anomalies existing among the Dental and Allied Health professionals in the public sector?

HON. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has acknowledge that there are existing salary discrepancies affecting healthcare workers employed by the Ministry. Some of these discrepancies have existed and remain uncorrected for many years up until now. The Ministry recognises the importance of addressing these salaries discrepancies.

For healthcare workers including the oral health, professional and allied health professionals employed by the Ministry, and these they are very much committed to this process. It is an ongoing process, thus take time and effort and require wide consultation with stakeholders, including the Government agencies.

We have started our nursing cadre which the Government had earlier endorsed and likewise we will anticipate other cadres within the healthcare sector to also put in a submission. At the moment, we are looking into the medical imaging technologist which the honourable Member had also raised in the Parliament last session. Sir, the Ministry will continue with the process to ensure that salary issues of its workers, including more than 200 oral health workers and more than 500 allied health practitioners currently in the Ministry are appropriately addressed.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we appreciate the attempt by the Coalition Government to rectify the issues with our nurses, it is concerning to note that the same has not happened to other health workers in the public sector. This is causing dissatisfaction, discomfort and pain, as I may say, among the workforce. My supplementary question to the honourable Minister, can he provide a projected timeline for these changes to happen?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- As I had alluded to earlier, it is a process whereby we do consultations with relevant agencies such as cadre of the association, including the one which the honourable Member is a member of, but for the time being, we have done that for the nurses, and we are looking into the Radio Imaging Technologists, which the honourable Member has also raised.

Again, Sir, it is a process whereby the Ministry, together with our stakeholders - the Ministry of Civil Service and the Ministry of Finance, will have to look into so that we can properly remunerate our healthcare workers. For the time being, it is just about dealing with our long serving staff to ensure that they are well remunerated for their years of service, so that is one of the areas that we are looking into.

Again, in terms of the Oral Health and Allied Healthcare workers, as of today, we are discussing with them on their way forward. They will bring their own submission. As a Ministry, we will sit down and discuss with them. As always, we will request the Ministry of Civil Service and the Ministry of Finance to accommodate those requests.

Bogus Employment Recruitment Agencies
(Question No. 58/2024)

HON. S. KIRAN asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations update Parliament on the action taken by the Ministry in dealing with bogus employment recruitment agencies in Fiji?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- I thank the honourable Assistant Minister for asking the question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry, as part of the process stipulated under the Employment Relations Regulations 2008 that actually governs employment agencies, has strengthened the regulatory framework, including the review and update of existing enforcement, compliance, and other regulatory procedures for recruitment agencies, to ensure that they are comprehensive and effective in addressing fraudulent practices. This includes implementing strict licensing requirements for recruitment agencies and a cash bond of \$20,000 is part of the requirement as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the requirement also ensures that potential employment agencies applying authorisation will have to provide clear description of the services to be provided to the job seekers and they must also provide police clearance and valid address from where the business will operate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of the inspection and compliance process, our Labour Inspectors promptly respond to any report on the operation of any bogus agency. We have, in the past, stopped recruitment agencies that have not been registered here and we have also asked them to go away.

The Ministry, as part of the Public Awareness Programme, has continuously been conducting radio talkback shows, as well as media releases, to ensure that our people are not hoodwinked by these unscrupulous agents.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is also working with other enforcement agencies, like the Police Force and the Department of Immigration, to ensure that we have a multi-sectorial approach and provide the right information and guidance to our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to remind any company or person who wishes to recruit Fijian workers for overseas employment opportunities that they must register with the Ministry of Employment and obtain necessary approval from the Permanent Secretary for Employment before conducting any business of registering, recruiting and deployment of workers for overseas deployment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Ministry responsible for the enforcement and compliance of the Employment Relations Regulations 2008, the Ministry ensures all foreign contracts of service are vetted and attested to by a Labour Officer before workers leave for overseas employment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to protect members of the public from becoming victims of fraudulent activities by illegal recruiters, it is important for them to verify their recruitment authorization before entering into any financial agreement or providing personal details. Members of the public must also

demand from the recruiting agent their valid authorization certificate from the Permanent Secretary for Employment to ensure that they are engaging with the authorized employment agency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the record, the National Employment Centre (NEC) under the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations is the only center authorized to prepare workers for employment opportunities in Australia under the PALM Scheme, or in New Zealand under the Recognised Seasonal Employer Work Scheme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry is always available to provide the right advice on overseas employment issues, to register their interest with the registered employment agencies authorized by the Ministry. I thank you, Sir.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his elaborate explanation. While the Minister had explained about the agencies here locally, I just want to ask the honourable Minister if there is a possibility of foreign or foreign employers coming directly and recruit workers in Fiji?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Thank you very much, Sir, and I thank honourable Koroilavesau for that question. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the requirement is that they must first register with the Ministry of Employment and there is a \$20,000 bond that they have to deposit. We do a thorough background check before we approve any agency that is interested to recruit our workers for overseas employment.

We continue to monitor as they recruit and each time they come, they must come through the Ministry and then guided by the Ministry to actually select and recruit. After our pre-departure training, they are able to then deploy. As I have stated earlier, the contract itself has to be attested by us before they depart.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, can the honourable Minister inform Parliament on the number of active agencies that they have with the Ministry, apart from NEC?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I understood clearly, honourable Bala asked whether there are any other agencies, apart from NEC. There is no agency, apart from NEC, that is authorized to register workers who seek employment abroad under the two Schemes. It is only through NEC that they can register. When the recruitment agencies come, they must come through NEC. After our due diligence is done, they are registered and after that, they can recruit. The eight agencies currently approved are:

1. Packleader Pacific Limited;
2. Alpha Pacific Navigation Pte Limited;
3. Pacific Employment Agency;
4. Adventure World Travels Limited;
5. Blue Harbour Recruitment Limited;
6. Manpower Supply and Staffing Limited;
7. Savenaca's Services; and
8. Colour Your Life Private Limited.

Those are the only eight that are authorised and, as I have said earlier, we regularly monitor them when they are around here.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question; the bogus employment recruitment agencies in Fiji, you are talking about those that are recruiting Fijians to go and work

overseas? There is the other side of recruiting where you are recruiting overseas workers to come in and work in Fiji. Are they included also in your scrutiny for those that are getting overseas workers? I heard the honourable Minister for Sugar said that those who came and worked for him came under a recruitment agency.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. For those employers who are interested in recruiting workers from abroad to work for them here in Fiji, they go through the Ministry of Immigration. But once the workers are here, they are employed, and it is the duty of our Ministry to ensure that the employers here comply with the minimum standards equal to those that are governing our local employees.

Utilisation of Funds for PPP for Housing
(Question No. 59/2024)

HON. A. TUICOLO asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics to update Parliament as to how the \$2 million allocated in this financial year for Public Private Partnership for Housing has been utilised?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his question on the utilisation of the \$2 million allocated under Head 50 for this particular project. Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to very quickly give you and Parliament a background, this Public Private Partnership (PPP) initiative was actually the brainchild of the FijiFirst Government. I think it was a good thinking to look at prospects of PPP in making sure that there is affordable housing because over the years, the number of increasing informal settlements has just continued. It has not gone down in any way, and the problem is getting bigger and bigger.

As a government, our vision is to look at the next 10 years and ensure that we provide affordable housing, that we make more land available and provide a mechanism through which we could increase the supply of houses available for this category of people.

The partnership agreement was signed with the International Financial Corporation (IFC), which is an organisation of the World Bank, to provide financial advisory services for the Government and also act as the lead for the project.

The idea, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was to earmark six sites - Davuilevu, Nepani, Wainibuku, Raiwaqa in the Central Division, a site in Takakubu, Lautoka, and in Tavua with a total area of 266 acres to develop the first pilot project which is expected to supply around 3,000 housing units which will be climate resilient, green and Category 5 cyclone compliance structures.

When we came into Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we looked at the whole proposal. We were, obviously, concerned about the success of PPP. We have PPP in the Health Sector and at some point in time, I will be informing Parliament as to what is going on there and how we intend to take that forward, so Cabinet has already looked at that.

We took a very, very careful and considered approach in making sure that we get the right advice and that once the project, although it is a pilot project, it is a significant one that will be done properly. We have looked at models around the country, the tender has already gone globally, the process is at the moment underway and once the technical analysis and the appropriate due diligence is done with respect to the kind of companies or contractors, of course, local contractors are also eligible to do that then, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will be embarking on that.

In the meantime, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a general point, we are also looking at other models to ensure that we address the whole issue of informal settlements. So out of the \$2 million allocated for the PPP affordable housing project in the Budget under Head 50, to-date a sum of \$859,702 has been utilised from the budgetary provision and that is essentially to accommodate the holding cost of four sites. Obviously, the Ministry of Housing and Local Government will be looking at that.

We are expecting that there will be some additional cost, we may not use all the \$2 million that has been allocated under Head 50. It will be a very prudent - *nahi paisa hai*. Honourable Bala is saying, we got the money, but I am saying *baut paisa hai*. That is where we are, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on that project.

Again, I want to emphasise that the Government is very much focused on making sure that we create opportunities, mechanisms so that we can address the increasing squatters and informal settlements in the country.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just wanted to ask the honourable Minister, the \$2 million that has been set aside for these projects, is this \$2 million just specified for the already identified sites or is it possible to divert for new sites that can be brought in by the private sector as part of the PPP?

HON. PROF. B.C PRASAD.- Yes, I think what we are saying is that this is going to be a pilot project. These sites were already identified, and we have focused on those 3,000 housing units and \$2 million was allocated to ensure that all the holding costs or any other costs associated with making this project start is there. As I said, we may not use all the \$2 million but obviously the answer to your question, honourable Koroilavesau is “yes, we have to look at more because 3,000 is not enough” given the magnitude and the volume that we would require to address all the informal settlements and squatter settlements throughout the country.

Repatriation of Chinese Nationals in 2017
(Question No. 60/2024)

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration inform Parliament on the repatriation of Chinese nationals from Nadi International Airport in 2017?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in July 2017, a joint operation was conducted involving the Fiji Police Force, Department of Immigration and the People’s Republic of China Police Force. This operation targeted cyber related crimes perpetrated by Chinese nationals in Fiji. The operation was executed under the framework of the Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Act 1997 and was conducted simultaneously by Chinese officials in countries like Indonesia, China and of the six locations in Fiji.

The operation was initiated following a memorandum from the Ministry of Public Security of the People’s Republic of China which was dated July 2017. The memorandum detailed a series of cyber fraud cases linked to criminal syndicate led by a suspect named Mr. Wu Chang. The syndicate had established fake gambling websites leading to significant financial losses for victims, including tragic cases where a victim in Jilin Province committed suicide after being defrauded of over \$3.3million Chinese Yuan. Upon the approval of the Chinese request that was made to Fiji and the Police Force, the Chinese delegation of seven police officers arrived in Fiji to assist with the investigations.

The operation on 18th July, 2017 involved six teams, comprising Fiji Police Officers, Immigration officials, Chinese Police Officers and interpreters from the Chinese Embassy. The operation took place in six occasions within the Nadi area namely, Nakurakura, Naisoso, Bountiful, Votualevu, Legalega and Maigania. This effort led to the apprehension of 77 Chinese nationals involved in the cyber-related crimes.

These individuals had arrived in Fiji, we are talking about the 77 people who are alleged to have committed this offence, arrived in Fiji between May and June 2017 on a four-month visitor permit. Investigations revealed that they were operating from rented dwelling houses set up as operations centres to entice victims into fraudulent online betting schemes. Given their actions, the Department of Immigration recommended that these individuals be declared prohibited immigrants under section 13(2)(g) of the Immigration Act 2003. They were placed under house arrest in Legalega and Naisoso pending further action.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important to note that Fiji and China do not have an extradition treaty to-date. However, that repatriation was facilitated under the provisions of the Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Act 1997, which allows for cooperation between countries in criminal investigations and the enforcement of legal measures. Might I add that we had used similar provisions for repatriation recently to the US on drug related offences and on the current case that involved Mr. Kim from Grace Road, the case being currently pending in the High Court.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, subsequently section 9 of the Act enables foreign countries to request assistance in criminal matters and section 133 permits the Attorney-General to authorise search and seizure operations in response to such request. Consequently, detention warrants and removal orders outlined in section 9(2) were issued for these individuals.

The breaches of their visitor permit conditions as outlined in section 9(2) and section (64)(1)(k) of the Immigration Act 2003 warranted their repatriation. These measures were necessary to uphold Fiji's laws and maintain public order at the time. The repatriation process ensured that the 77 Chinese nationals were deported from Nadi International Airport back to their home county.

Specialised Training and Resources for Teachers
(Question No. 61/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Education inform Parliament on what specialist training and resources are being provided to teachers to assist them in dealing with the huge problem of drug possession and drug use prevalent in our schools?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think I have answered some of these in yesterday's question, but I would like to take this time to clarify and inform this august House on the important roles and responsibilities that are placed with the teachers. As we know the responsibility of disciplining students in the Ministry of Education is confined only to the school boundaries or school organised activities in the boundaries whereby teachers can monitor students' actions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, once the students walk out of the school gate this is considered a public space and public area and students' activities become the responsibility of other Government agencies like the Fiji Police Force or the Ministry of Social Welfare. They usually liaise with the Heads of Schools on student behaviours and the schools will always contact the parents or guardians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I mentioned yesterday, the Ministry of Education's role starts with the Substance Abuse Advisory Council (SAAC) which is the statutory body in the Ministry of Education. They have, over the years, been responsible for the drug demand reduction programmes in schools. This includes the provision of training for teachers on areas in:

- how to identify the signs of students who may be using or abusing drugs;
- the type of drugs available in Fiji;
- its effects, the legal implications; and
- we are also helping out students trying to recover from drugs.

I am sure, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we will all agree that the Ministry of Education cannot hold the bull by the horn alone, it needs a united front from the family unit, *vanua*, government, religious organisations and civil society to restrain the drug problem.

Since 2010, the SAAC has been providing training to teachers in schools and these trainings have been intensified with the support of the Police Drug Unit and Ministry of Health. This joint effort has resulted in having 1,960 teachers from the nine education districts who attended these organised trainings. These trainings also include the support mechanism available in school to assist the student who are showing signs of being addicted to drugs and the positive step towards recovery. The drug recovery plan also include the support that parents, teachers and friends will provide to the student.

The Police Drug Unit now called the Police Narcotics Bureau facilitated an in-depth training sessions with the teachers on all aspect of drugs and substances - the drug effects, signs and symptoms, legislation, handling of drugs, reporting and referral. The Fiji Police Force Blue Light Programme which empowers students is also a platform for our students to share and take responsibility and consequences of their decision.

Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with this training, these trained teachers conduct awareness during professional development through school staff meeting sessions, sharing the strategies in curbing the use and sale of drugs in their respective schools and mechanisms to actively listen and help students with drug symptoms.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I thank the honourable Minister for his response. The data or information provided by the Substance Abuse Advisory Council is quite alarming, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the last three years. In 2021, there were 2,200 cases reported in schools. In 2022, there were 2,800 cases and last year 3,500 cases. It is a fight that the honourable Minister cannot fight alone, and it calls for our unified effort, not only by the Government but also the people in the community. My question is, are our children safe in their schools?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can only say that the Ministry of Education is providing a safe environment, the best as it can with all the support and necessary facilitation from other relevant agencies.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, as you rightfully pointed out, and I think honourable Naivalurua also did say that, it requires a concerted effort on all interested parties. My question is relative to the parents because this begins at home. In terms of the training being given to teachers, is there a concerted effort on the part of the Ministry to engage with each parent teacher association, to ensure that the parents are well-informed about the hazards, et cetera, that exist in schools and about the drug use and how it can be dealt with at home? Because the discipline needs to start at home. Is there an effort to engage with the parent teacher association at every school?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member. As I have said, on processes within the Ministry, there is always engagement of parents and parental consent when students are identified to be in possession of drugs.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Honourable Minister, I do agree that the drug issue is everyone's issue and it is corroding the future of our country. With the trainings you have spoken of that has been given to 1,960 teachers, is there any provision for the school management and the teachers to be equipped with the drug testing kits?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that was a very good question by the honourable Member, given the task at hand that has been expected from the teachers to provide proper teaching methodology to the students and imparting knowledge, these are some additional areas that probably might be considered by the Ministry in discussion with the relevant stakeholders such as the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Defence to ensure that we are not putting ourselves at risk, especially the teachers, for conducting this extra or additional responsibilities.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I intend to adjourn the Parliament now for lunch and we will resume at 2.30p.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.33 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.37 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before we move on to the second stage of questioning, that is, on the Written Questions, please, join me in welcoming another lot of Year 10 students from Yat Sen Secondary School. Welcome to your Parliament and I hope that the proceedings will give you a better idea of how your Parliament works.

We look forward to more visits such as this as it enables us to, kind of, come to grips with what sort of interest it generates to the younger part of our population, that is, the school children. We would like to encourage more visits, so the more visits you make, the more you will learn about this very important aspect of our country where democracy exists - how it makes laws, how it changes and amends laws and how it even repeals laws. So, welcome, and I hope you enjoy your visit here this afternoon.

Justices of Peace
(Question No. 62/2024)

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Justice inform Parliament on;

- (a) the names of all the Justices of the Peace; and
- (b) their physical addresses by District, Province and Division as at 31st March, 2024?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, due to the nature of the requested information, I will table my response at a later sitting date, as permitted under Standing Order 45.

MR. SPEAKER.- I have been advised that honourable Premila Kumar has withdrawn her Written Question.

(Question No. 63/2024 withdrawn)

Farm Access Roads
(Question No. 64/2024)

HON. I.S. VANAWALU ask the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways inform Parliament on how many Agricultural farm access roads have been completed in this financial year and what are the future plans of the Ministry in this regard?

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have the written answers to the written question.

MR. SPEAKER.- Very great.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Efficiency, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Acclamation)

MR. SPEAKER.- That is good, you are reacting to the honourable Members of the Opposition's comments.

Solar Homes System Projects
(Question No. 65/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport provide Parliament with a list of all the Solar Homes System projects that were scheduled to be undertaken in 2023-2024 financial year to include the following information -

- (a) the budget for each project;
- (b) the dates each project was or is scheduled to be completed; and
- (c) the percentage completion for each project as at 1st May, 2024.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will table my response at a later sitting date as permitted under Standing Order 45(3).

METEOROLOGICAL AND HYDROLOGICAL SERVICES BILL 2024

HON. RO. F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the -

- (a) Meteorological and Hydrological Services Bill 2024 (Bill No. 03/2024), be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must not be referred to a Standing Committee or other committee of Parliament; and
- (d) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Thursday, 23rd May, 2024, but that one hour be given to debate the Bill with the Right of Reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

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

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Meteorological and Hydrological Bill 2024 seeks to establish and recognise the Fiji Meteorological and Hydrological Services, and empowers the Director of Meteorological Services to carry out his or her duties in the most effective manner - having practical provisions of weather forecast and promotion of public sector private engagement in the delivery of weather services in Fiji.

At the moment, there is no established legal provisions with regulating meteorological and hydrological services in Fiji. This proposed legislation aims to outline the establishment and responsibilities of the Fiji Meteorological and Hydrological Services which is currently the Fiji Meteorological Service.

This service may, in future, be established as a body corporate responsible for providing meteorological and hydrological services and carrying out functions just outlined in the Bill. It provides for the effective and efficient provision of meteorological and hydrological services in order to contribute to a sustainable economic development, protection of livelihoods and property for meteorological and hydrological disasters and hazards.

In addition, the proposed Bill also encapsulates the important contribution of Fiji Meteorological Services towards the Nadi Flight Information Region and in provision of aviation

services to selected aerodromes in the Southwest Pacific. The Bill also recognises Fiji's leading role in the region by providing weather forecasts and warnings to many of these smaller island countries in the Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, by way of historical information, the first recorded observation in Fiji in terms of weather was by a volunteer by the name of Robert Fung in Delainasau, Bua, in 1871. Between 1876 and 1890, additional volunteers recorded the amount of rainfall at various locations, including Qarawalu, Waimanu, Wainunu, Suva, Nausori, Rakiraki, Ba, Lautoka and Labasa. In 1939, the Defence Conference designated Suva as a site of offering weather services in the Pacific region, marking the start of air temperature observations in Fiji.

The South Pacific Air Transport Council (SPATC) was founded in 1946 to oversee civil aviation activities in the Pacific region. The Meteorological Office in Nadi was founded by SPATC and functioned as a branch of the New Zealand Meteorological Services. Its main purpose was to write weather services and assist in civil aviation requirements.

In 1940, a Meteorological Office was set up as a section of the Royal New Zealand Air Force and the goal was to provide aviation weather forecasts to Military Aircrafts at Laucala Bay. Forecasting operations in Laucala Bay ceased in 1947 and merged with the Meteorological Office in Nadi, downscaling operations to collection quality control and archival of records for service observations.

Following independence in 1970, Fiji took over the role of regional aviation from SPATC. The Meteorological Service was established in July 1975 and took over the responsibility of providing forecasts to the marine and public sectors as part of its expanded services. The Fijian Government acquired the ownership of SPATC assets in July 1979, and managed the services provided by SPATC in Fiji.

In 1980, Fiji become a member of the World Meteorological Organisation. In 1982, Mr. Ram Krishna was selected as the inaugural Director of the Meteorological Services. In 1996, the Meteorological Services was designated as the Regional Specialised Meteorological Centre (RSMC) for the Southwest Pacific region to issue marine forecasts and warnings for the high seas or international waters.

Sir, the RSMC in Nadi is one of the only six centres globally which provides essential tropical cyclone related information, including the naming of tropical cyclones and the related alerts and warnings.

In 2012, for the responsibility of part forecasting was moved from the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Water Authority of Fiji to the Fiji Meteorological Service, a department within the then Ministry of Infrastructure and Meteorological Services. Discussions have taken place with various organisations and institutions such as the World Meteorological Organization, World Bank, Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji, National Disaster Management Office, Fiji National University, University of Fiji, Red Cross, Energy Fiji Limited, Fiji Hotel Association and the various ministries.

The proposed Bill is also part of the policy reforms as recommended by international institutions, such as World Bank to enable a more efficient and effective development partnership and also in terms of looking into the future financing, especially accessing of climate financing.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will try and be brief. We understand what is in the Bill, but what we do not understand is the urgency. Nothing in here that is contained in the Bill says

that there is an absolute urgency that it needs to go through Standing Order 51. Once again, we have heard quite a lot from the other side, I know they will turn around and say, “Oh, you used to do it.” But you complained about it when we did it, so why are you doing it? The point here is that there are particular provisions, first of all there is no reason. Second of all, most importantly, they are the ones who turned around and told us that we go through this consultative exercise when these Bills are taking place. So, why should it not go to a Committee?

Most importantly, Sir, also there are three objectives that are put into this particular Bill into clause 3, and one is the effective and efficient delivery of the service; two, which is important is actually promoting public and private engagement. Again, this would be a provision that would require a Committee to have a look at it because there is public and private engagement in this. Most of all, there is a provision in here, which I am sure we will argue about when it is actually on the floor, is that it is now going to be an offence for any other person unauthorised who is going to issue a weather report.

That is my current understanding after a quick cursory glance of it. If you put all those things into perspective, I think it is only unfair to the general public and to all of those who do weather reports and to the people who may want to engage privately in this that it is actually, properly and thoroughly vetted through the Committee before it comes back to Parliament. Otherwise, I do not know what the reason could be.

I cannot see for the life of me in here a reason that says that it has to be shot through quickly so we can actually get this amendment. There is a gap, of course, they said that there were no regulations before, all the more reason that it be thoroughly vetted before a Committee. It is not too late for them to put it back just like they did with the Heritage Bill. We ask that the Government have a good look at it because there are provisions that they put in there themselves that would mean that there would need to be proper deliberation through the Committee and a consultative exercise with the general public in Fiji and those who are involved in it.

Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that particular clause that I am actually talking states and I quote:

“7(1) Any person who issues a weather warning or alert, including a flood alert or causes the warning or alert to be issued without prior authorisation of the Director in consultation with the Minister, commits an offence.”

There are quite a few people around Fiji who do issue weather reports that a lot of people of Fiji rely on. All of those things need to be thoroughly vetted. We are against it going through Standing Order 51. We understand the content of the Bill, and the Bill proper is actually being argued, but against it going to Standing Order 51 suggests that we take it back to the Committee for it to be deliberated properly.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to contribute to the motion before Parliament, particularly, again on the use of Standing Order 51. We have nothing against the Bill, and we know how important it is, but there are few good reasons as to why we would urge the Government to reconsider having this Bill to go through Standing Order 51. For me, in looking at the Bill, it has included not only the Meteorological Services but the Hydrological Services as well.

I will link this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the National Disaster Management Act which probably will be coming as well this week and the history behind the Hydrological Unit that is now under Meteorological Services. This Hydrological Unit, Sir, used to be with then the Public Works Department before the establishment of Water Authority of Fiji.

When Water Authority of Fiji came into existence, Sir, they shifted this Hydrological Unit to Water Authority of Fiji, but this is what happened, and this is why I am urging the Government to look at the passage in which this Bill will come through. I have seen in the sitting calendar that we have another sitting in August, another sitting in September, sitting in October and, of course, one in November as well. So, probably we can still, if they still prefer to bring it under Standing Order 51 like yesterday, probably just put a timeline to it but go through the Committee.

Let me go back to what I was going to explain, Mr. Speaker, Sir. *TC Evans* was in December 2012, that was a big learning for us, and this is why the role of the Meteorological Unit is so important. What happened during *TC Evans*, there was heavy rainfall up in the highlands but very light showers in the Nadi area. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Nadi Riverbank, the critical level is around 6 metres. So, what happened during *TC Evans*, the Meteorological Unit was giving the weather information. It was interpreted at National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) and we gave the advisories but without the specific input of the Hydrological Unit. This resulted in the death of a man at the Nadi back road because this is what happened, Sir.

While Nadi was safe, I was at the NDMO that early morning from 3 o'clock, water level was around 2 metres and then all of a sudden, every hour it is rising by about a metre each – three metres, 4 metres, 5 metres and we were wondering because of what was happening in Nadi, we could not come to a conclusion as to why the rapid increase or rise in the water level.

The investigations after the death, Mr. Speaker, Sir, found out that the highlands, the rainfall was going at between 60 millimetres to 90 millimetres per hour. That is the new norm. The rainfall pattern in Fiji has changed significantly and without the input of the Hydrological Unit, Fiji Meteorological Services was just giving the weather forecast, NDMO was interpreting the weather forecast and giving the advisories without the input of the Hydrological Unit, it resulted in the death and that was why it was shifted out of WAF so that they can be co-located with the Meteorological Services but they have very specific functions to perform, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This is why I am requesting, give us time because we need to relate this with the NDMO Act that is coming soon as well. We have been consulted. I have been consulted too about the NDMO Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reason why I am urging Government to please consider this to be put before the Committee is because of the role of the Meteorological Office in the Paris Agreement, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). I advised you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, before we went to Tonga on the signs in Fiji is handled by the Meteorological Office. He is the focal point, the Director Meteorological.

We need to look at that given the role of IPCC in the climate change and we have our Climate Act which probably we need to look at it as well so that we can come up with a better approach when it comes to the final contents of the Bill. Again, nothing against what we have, we know the need but, of course, based on these two issues, I would urge Government to please consider this to be brought before the Committee and we can bring it back say in September or October but at least put it through the Committee so that we can tie up all these issues so that we can be relevant and it is not only about now, but it is about the future as well.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to first of all congratulate the honourable Minister for bringing this Bill into Parliament and to Cabinet and the fact that it has come to Parliament. A lot of hard work has gone to it, through the work of the staff at the Fiji Meteorological including the assistance of the World Meteorological Organisations in its initial drafting. I congratulate all the members of the staff there, Teri Atalifo, Misa Funaki they are no longer with us and the current management for bringing it through because it was great that we have finally got to this stage.

There are a lot of things in this Bill that I endorse but there are also issues here that we really have to look at carefully and I think the honourable Minister has talked about the number of consultations they have done. Those consultations were done amongst stakeholders at the executive level but in a Bill like this which is talking about establishing a new organisation that runs on its own, I think it needs to be also considered at the legislative level by the representatives of the people.

The representatives of the people are in Parliament, they have to have an opportunity through the Committees, this is the operational arm of Parliament to look at some of the issues that have been raised by the honourable Leader of the Opposition and a few others. Some of the issues that the honourable Koya has raised some of the other issues, the other one that we have here is of course, the idea has been for it to be a standalone organisation that is able to charge fees for its services, which is to my mind is a good idea.

I think it needs to be thoroughly scrutinized at the level of the legislature itself and that thorough scrutiny is done by the Committees of Parliament. Now, I will encourage the Government to reconsider this and as the honourable Leader of the Opposition has stated to allow sometime to get the Committees to have a look at it, to call the people that we need to call, to listen to alternative views and then to come up with its recommendation to Parliament.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think it is not worth to highlight before Parliament. There was a Bill in 2016 and it lapsed, no action taken by the FijiFirst Government. In 2022 there was a draft, Coalition came in, sees all the issues, addressed it, consulted with the officers and we bring it to Parliament. There are only 12 simple provisions. What happens, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the powers of meteorology is drawn from various legislation. Ideally for one who works in that office, they would like a legislation on it. They want to take ownership, that is the simple reason.

There was an issue raised in terms of offence, yes that is the reason why it is not in the Act, it is in the Regulations. There have been issues, deliberated with the officers what has happened in the past and obviously the same officers that they consulted, the same officers we are consulting. For the past weeks we have been consulting, there have been collaboration between the office of the Director NDMO and the honourable Minister. The people need this, the Meteorological Office needs it, we need to move this. Mr. Speaker, Sir, 2060 is a long time, we are now in 2024. I support this Bill.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in response to some of the concerns raised, the Standing Orders, of course, is an ongoing debate and it is a provision there which we will continue to utilise but in a responsible and pragmatic way. Unlike in the past, it was used irresponsibly and, of course, we see the data there and how many Bills they have passed using that. We will move forward in that using it in a pragmatic and responsible way.

In terms of the issue of public private engagement, that is there as an option, and that is something we need to move forward with in terms of the current environment within, in relation to development partners which are not probably Government's but also in the private sector in terms of making investments and returns of investments. That is also well covered in terms of formulation of MOAs, MOUs, which, of course, will be thoroughly scrutinised through the systems in the Executive, such as Cabinet sub-committees, et cetera.

The weather reports and the concern about the fines, the provision is there for the Minister to have further regulations. We will not be surprising everyone who is just making an announcement about the weather because that is what they are implying and that would be addressed that way. Regarding the concerns about the coordination and operations, we have consulted, as mentioned by the honourable Attorney-General.

The NDMO, the Hydrological Services and where it could be best placed, thank you to the honourable Leader of the Opposition for his insights and, of course, that is taken into account when we are looking into the operational part of this.

There was mention of Meteorological Services to be standalone. Yes, the Bill will give us an option, moving forward, whether it becomes fully standalone or statutory but, at least, we are taking the first step towards that. It also molds well into the current environment in terms of our engagement with our international development partners.

Question put.

Vote cast

Ayes	-	28
Noes	-	23

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members and students from Yat Sen Secondary School, you will notice that the results were thrown up there and this is something that is fairly new, not really new but we have been having this for quite some time now. The result of our voting is quickly tabulated on the screens in front of you so as help us understand better on how the voting is done. In this case, the motion is carried.

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 130(2) to (4) is suspended so as to allow the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Justice to move his motion on the approval of an international Treaty without referring it to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence.

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the motion being referred to, that Parliament approves that Fiji signs and ratifies the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF):

1. Overarching Agreement;
2. Clean Economy Agreement; and
3. Fair Economy Agreement.

Sir, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework is a United States led initiative with Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malayasia, New Zealand, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Fiji is the only Pacific Island country that was invited and joined the 14 Member Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) for prosperity which was launched in May 2022.

The negotiation of the four pillars of the IPEF commenced after the Ministers agreed to the scope in November 2022 and was considered that an extremely fast pace.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important that the IPEF partners announce the substantial conclusion

of the negotiations of Pillar 2 – Supply Chain Agreement, in May 2023.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- In assistance to the honourable Minister, Sir, I think he has forgotten that this is the suspension motion, not the actual motion.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Yes, so that is why I am coming to an end.

(Laughter)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Sir, that is why we have to suspend, I still have 18 minutes.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, are you coming to it now?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Yes, Sir. Given the importance of these agreements and the IPEF, that we approve the suspension motion in order to consider this.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. The motion, as rightly put by honourable Koya, is the suspension motion. But the honourable Minister was right in saying he was just getting to it and then he rounded off there by going on to the suspension motion. Let me remind you, on the suspension.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the suspension, that is why I am having the Standing Order with me. Just seeking clarification, is it about suspending beyond 4.30 p.m. or is it about suspending the motion?

Yes, it is about suspending the motion for the honourable Attorney-General to move the motion. It is not about 4.30 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- That is housekeeping.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Yes, that is housekeeping, it is not yet.

MR. SPEAKER.- That is part of my work.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Yes, I will be talking about suspension of Standing Order 130, as alluded to by the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I read Standing Order 130 that states, and I quote:

“(2) The Attorney-General must give notice of a motion for the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence to review a treaty. The notice must be accompanied by a -

- (a) copy of the treaty; and
- (b) written analysis that includes the following information-
 - (i) a summary of the treaty;
 - (ii) the requirements for its implementation within a signatory State; and
 - (iii) a statement of the impact of the treaty on Fiji.

(3) At the time appointed under Standing Order 34 for motions for which notice has been given, the Speaker must, without debate, refer the treaty and the analysis to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence for consideration and review,

and the Standing Committee on the Foreign Affairs and Defence may table a report in Parliament not later than 30 days after the treaty has been referred to it.

- (4) The Attorney-General may move a motion that the treaty be approved by Parliament if the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence –
- (a) tables a report on the treaty; or
 - (b) does not table a report on the treaty within the required 30 day period referred to in clause (3).”

This is what we are actually seeking in here by the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament to be suspended.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been hearing a lot about Standing Order 51, that we have been bringing Bills under Standing Order 51, and they have been scrutinising us and telling us all about the Bills.

(Hon. M.S.N. Kamikamica interjects)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- I have 20 minutes, honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

We were being blamed for bringing this under Standing Order 51. We accepted it, we were bringing Bills under Standing Order 51 and we never denied it. There were urgencies, so we brought it.

Now, they are doing it. They have actually taken a step further, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to fast-track the Treaties. Why are we doing this for the Treaties?

I agree this is not the first time, this is the second time. The first time when they actually made this blunder, we thought they will consider it when bringing the second Treaty. Now, it is becoming a regular task for them to bring in Treaties, suspend Standing Order 130 and expedite ratifying the Treaty. What is this?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have a procedure in place for Treaties. What is the urgency for bringing in the Treaties?

MR. SPEAKER.- I am giving you the time to finish.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- You people are not talking to each other, that is the problem.

MR. SPEAKER.- I am giving you time to finish, honourable Maharaj, and then I will reply.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- What we actually fail to understand, Mr. Speaker, what is the urgency of bringing this treaty in such a manner? We know they have got 100 percent of their Bills under Standing Order 51, even new Ministers introducing Bills are doing so under Standing Order 51. They are the same Ministers who have been objecting to the of Standing Order 51 all this while and now as I am suggesting, they have gone further to bring treaties.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Honourable Minister, the vide is recording, you are now caught on video.

Nevertheless, Mr. Speaker, our concern over here is that we should refer treaties to Committees and if it was this urgent, we actually had a Parliament sitting in April. They could have actually brought the treaty in April, given it to the Standing Committee, the Standing Committee would actually produce a report within 30 days in this Parliament sitting and we could have actually debated and ratified the treaty.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is the reason why the suspension motion.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- If it is so urgent it can still be referred to the Standing Committee and we can have a Special Parliamentary sitting to ratify the treaty.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Talk to your leader.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- That is the clarification I would like to seek and oppose suspending of Standing Order 130.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the issue raised by honourable Maharaj, he is seeking that he highlighted SO130(2). May I ask that you read the motion that is before you very quickly and clearly. You better understand what the Government is trying to address here. That is the very core of this motion. It is a suspension of clauses 130(2) and (4) so as to the allow honourable Attorney-General to then go to that.

So, they are going around it avoiding subclauses (2) and (4) by going straight to what then will be brought in by the learned Attorney-General. I hope I have clarified that because you are seeking clarification and you have quoted sub-clause (2); that s suspended now.

(Hon. A.A. Maharaj interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- No. You raised that issue.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Yes.

MR. SPEAKER.- You quoted sub-clause (2) and that is what I am trying to help you with in clarifying that. The very motion that is before us now is the suspension of Standing Order 130(2) and (4).

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- And that is what we do not agreed to, Mr. Speaker, of suspending those and not sending the treaty to the Committee. That is our stand from the Opposition.

MR. SPEAKER.- It is both in Subclauses (2) and (4).

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Yes.

MR. SPEAKER.- We are suspending it so we do not refer it to the Committees as you rightly quoted. So, suspension is there now. Anything else? Any other comments?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Sir, perhaps the other side of Parliament are not talking to each other.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Sir, let me explain. This treaty is the best thing that has ever

happened for this country.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Their Prime Minister actually approved getting involved in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. What they are suggesting is that we delay the process of getting this done. Our Ministry, because of the respect we have for that side of Parliament which they never gave according to honourable Tabuya, consulted the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Koya. I think it is about three hours to advice on what we are trying to achieve.

The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), I am not joking, Sir, is a significant agreement for Fiji. I am going to Singapore, the intent is to deliver the instruments in Singapore as the first country that is going to ratify the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. It has been vetted fully by the Solicitor-General's Office together with 14 other legal officers in the world.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- What value can you provide? My suggestion, Sir, is I ask the Opposition, we agreed, the same process was followed with one pillar, Pillar 2 on supply chain and we are doing the same thing again and for some reason they have changed their minds. I suppose we will have to put it to vote, but I was hoping, Sir, that we do this on a bipartisan basis because this is good for Fiji.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I need to clarify the Opposition's position on this. Let me assure the honourable Minister that we are communicating. This is a matter of procedure, do not take the Opposition for granted. That is the point.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Yeah!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- We know how important this is for Fiji.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Stop grandstanding.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- We are not opposing this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but as a matter of procedure because this is an abuse...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- No, it is not.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- ... of what is laid out in the Standing Orders because they will make it as a precedent based on the agreement that we did before. Let me just tell the honourable Minister, we communicated with the staff and we communicated with the Opposition in the caucus, we agreed that this will be raised but we still support it, Mr. Speaker, Sir. That is our position and that has not changed but do not take the Opposition for granted; that is the point Mr. Speaker, Sir. We have been there and gone through this.

This IPEF was initiated by us, we were there and we know how important it is. We have given the assurance to the officials that we will support it but what is coming from the Opposition is about the process because this is supposed to go through the Committees. It is supposed to go through the Committee and we are trying to help you so that the ratification can take place as planned but of course it is a matter of procedure. You have no business to talk about the Opposition, we are here to handle the Opposition matters but we are here to look at the big picture and that is what we will stand for.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think it is actually disrespectful for the honourable Leader of the Opposition to raise the issue again when you clearly clarified that the suspension motion was to go beyond the procedures. The suspension motion is itself a procedure of Parliament, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and you allowed that in the Business Committee.

The motion was moved by the honourable Minister, despite that, we had honourable Maharaj going over and over and again talking about the procedure when the suspension motion allows them. Mr. Speaker, Sir, you also have additional powers under Standing Order 20 to make this decision and you rightfully and correctly clarified. I do not see why there is any fuss on that.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the suspension, I think it has been explained to honourable Maharaj and I thank you, Sir, for that explanation. It is just a matter of reading that motion or hearing what I said to move that Standing Order 130(2) to (4) be suspended so that we can move forward with this.

I was trying to explain the rationale on why we need this, but they shouted me down, if I had finished that then probably there would have a better understanding. This is a critical issue at the moment in terms of this framework which we need to conclude and the timing too is very important. That is why the Standing Order are made out this way so that we cater for situations such as what we are facing now because we need to sign this framework early next month. I am sure that the Opposition know the benefits of this to the country, at least they are smiling now, they are not angry...

(Laughter)

We can move forward, we continue to move forward as one.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, so much has been said, differences of views and opinions as well but Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

RATIFICATION OF THE INDO-PACIFIC ECONOMIC FRAMEWORK

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move that Parliament approves that Fiji signs and ratifies the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF):

- (a) the Overarching Agreement;
- (b) the Clean Economy Agreement; and
- (c) the Fair Economy Agreement.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- We are becoming a merry go round now.

(Laughter)

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework is a United States-led initiative. It was launched in 2022 with its founding members including Australia, Brunei

Darussalam, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, Republic of Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The IPEF comprise four pillars of co-operation amongst its partners.

Pillar 1 focuses on Trade, Pillar 2 on Supply Chain, Pillar 3 on a Clean Economy and Pillar 4 on a Fair Economy.

Last year, Parliament unanimously approved the ratification of the Agreement relating to Supply Chain Resilience which was negotiated under Pillar II (Supply Chain). This Agreement, the first of IPEF Agreement to take effect, came into force on February this year, marking a significant milestone of Fiji's economic and strategic partnerships with Indo-Pacific region.

Recently, IPEF negotiators have successfully concluded agreements on Pillar III (Clean Economy) and Pillar IV (Fair Economy), along with overarching agreement to ensure a sustainable framework for future ministerial level cooperation among IPEF partners.

Each of these IPEF Agreements presented to Parliament has been meticulously negotiated to align with our national interests and a broader vision of a prosperous and secure Indo-Pacific region.

We have an overarching agreement, formally called the Agreement on IPEF, which sets forth a clear and structured approach to achieving the objectives of IPEF.

It does this by establishing a governing body - the IPEF Council, that is composed of ministerial-level representatives from each Party, responsible for overseeing the implementation and coordination of the IPEF agreements. This IPEF Council is tasked with considering the collective operational matters, proposing new agreements and discussing amendments with decisions made by consensus.

The overarching agreement also establishes a Joint Commission which comprises of representatives from parties to specific subject agreements, overseeing the implementation of those agreements.

We have next the IPEF Agreement relating to Clean Economy under Pillar III of the IPEF for ratification. This Agreement marks a crucial step towards promoting a sustainable future for Fiji and our regional partners. Allow me to summarize its key elements and the substantial benefits it will bring to our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the IPEF Clean Economy Agreement, although largely non-binding, provides an economic framework aimed at supporting the climate goals of participating countries. It focusses on accelerating the deployment of clean technologies and facilitating investments.

Under this Agreement, the IPEF partners, including Fiji, will collaborate on the following three issues:

1. research and development of clean energy technologies;
2. commercialisation and deployment of these technologies to ensure they are accessible and affordable; and
3. building infrastructure that supports de-carbonisation efforts.

This Agreement emphasises the importance of investing in climate-friendly projects, partnering with the private sector to leverage market opportunities in the clean economy, and creating quality job opportunities through industrialization.

To support these initiatives, this Agreement offers financing options, technical assistance and capacity building measures. The United States has also introduced complementary initiatives such as the Global Climate Fund and the Catalytic Capital Fund.

For Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Agreement presents opportunities to advance clean energy technologies, attract investments to build climate resilience, and supports sustainable economic growth.

Moreover, this Agreement establishes an annual IPEF Investor Forum. The inaugural forum will be hosted by Singapore on 5th to 6th June, 2024 (next month), providing a platform for investors to connect and share ideas.

Honourable Members, the IPEF Clean Economy Agreement is a vital tool for Fiji's development and our global climate commitments. Ratifying this Agreement will enable significant advancements in our clean energy sector, attract essential investments and above all, enhances our economic resilience.

Finally, honourable Members, we have the Agreement relating to a Fair Economy under Pillar IV. This Agreement is a pivotal step towards enhancing transparency, combating corruption and fostering a fair economic environment within our region. Let me outline the key components and anticipated benefits of this Agreement for Fiji.

The IPEF Economy Agreement is dedicated to combating corruption, enhancing tax administration and transparency, and fostering cooperation among partner countries. This Agreement prioritises anti-corruption initiatives, transparency in tax matters and capacity building efforts to establish a transparent and predictable trade and investment environment.

This Agreement has three main areas:

1. Preventing and combating corruptions and related to financial crimes
2. Improving tax administration and transparency; and
3. Co-operation, information sharing and capacity building.

Through collaboration on these issues, we will create a more transparent and predictable trade and investment environment across our economies.

Honourable Members, the IPEF Fair Economy Agreement offers Fiji a significant opportunity to enhance our economic framework, attract investments and promote sustainable growth. This Agreement aligns with our commitment to transparency, fairness and good governance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the ratification of the IPEF Agreements will mark a significant milestone in Fiji's commitment to regional co-operation and sustainable development. It will also demonstrate our strong commitment to the shared goals of prosperity and stability within the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move that Parliament approves that Fiji ratifies the tabled IPEF Agreements.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. I have a list of speakers in front of me from the honourable Whips, as follows :

1. Hon. F.S. Koya;
2. Hon. Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs;

3. Hon. P.D. Kumar;
4. Hon. Attorney-General and Minister for Justice;
5. Hon. I.B. Seruiratu; and
6. Hon. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Cooperatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am very happy to hear that the honourable Attorney-General was distracted by us rather than him saying, ‘distracted by us, Sir’.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is quite a momentous occasion for all Fijians because as rightfully pointed out by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Cooperatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications, this is an important milestone for Fiji that we need to get it through.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the IPEF Agreement which we all know when it started, et cetera, and the trials and tribulations that they have actually gone through to get to this stage, aims to establish some very high standard commitments with respect to the four Pillars. As spelt out by the honourable Attorney-General, IPEF actually covers four Pillars and we must remember right from the outset that it is not actually a Free Trade agreement. But it is a stepping stone and a starting, I think, for many things to happen in the future, especially for Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the most important things that people forget, and I think everyone needs to be reminded, is that all of these 14 members tantamount to 40 percent of the global GDP, Sir, and that is 28 percent of the global goods and services trade. So, you have got some fairly high-powered people and countries that are actually part and parcel of IPEF. We are the only SIDS country that sits at the front table when we were invited from the beginning, so we should be very proud of the fact that we, Fiji, is a part and parcel of that particular 14 countries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I understand also how the negotiations have gone on, we have kept a track on and I think if I remember correctly, right at the outset, beginning of post-election, I had a quick word with the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Cooperatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications to say, “please, keep an eye on this because it is very important for Fiji.” He has done so, and I thank the honourable Minister for all the hard work that is going on, especially the hard work that is being done by the Trade Team at the Ministry of Trade.

I know they have worked very long hours to get through this. It has been literally done at a great neck speed because the USA has insisted, and I understand the level of travel that he has had to go through to actually get all of these things done. This is one of the reasons why we were asking for your Ministry to get more money so that you get all of these done.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were quite a lot of negotiations around the world with respect to all the four Pillars that has actually happened. The first Pillar that was alluded to was on Supply Chain Agreement in the States in May 2023. Pillar II has also been signed now by the 14 IPEF Partners. Basically, Sir, there is another portion to it which is the Overarching Agreement that also exists which looks at establishing the IPEF Council and a Joint Council and formalising the partnership between the 14 countries.

There is a Clean Economy Agreement which was also mentioned. The main objective of that is to accelerate clean energy transitions in scale and reduce the cost of innovative technologies. All of these also bodes well for Fiji in terms of the diversification that we talk about in terms of wanting

to make sure that we reach the milestones that we do in terms of SDGs. So, it has many, many tentacles to it that reaches different parts of our economy, different parts of our plans and different parts of our development.

As I have said, and I cannot say this enough, and the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Cooperatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications has pointed out that this is such an important Agreement to Fiji and we are wholeheartedly supporting it.

The other issue is with respect to the Fair Economy Agreement. With that particular portion, Sir, this actually focusses on preventing and combatting corruption, improving tax administration and transparency and promoting cooperation amongst the partner countries.

I had pointed out yesterday, Sir, this was one of the reasons why such an institution of FICAC is so important to this particular Agreement. They keep an eye on it, they want to check with respect to our corruption, et cetera, the tax administration we have had for many years and I had a quick conversation with the honourable Minister of Finance today regarding the situation with the European Union and us being blacklisted. We are still blacklisted in the EU, so it becomes a huge obstacle. This is a phenomenal and fantastic steppingstone for us for bigger and better things with respect to this particular economic framework.

All the necessary steps have also been taking place. I understand all the legal framework, the legal scrubbing, and this is actually for a trade agreement is being run in record time. We have had assistance also, I think, from consultants, et cetera, but our team, I know, and a massive, massive congratulations to the team at the Trade Unit. They have done really, really well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it must be said that these are a bunch of young people, very young Fijians who have been part and parcel of this particular negotiations. I know for a fact that we have had consultations with the Solicitor-General's Office, the Office of the Attorney-General, FICAC, et cetera, in terms of the negotiations and the legal scrubbing that actually has to go on, the stakeholder consultations had been wide and varied, so all of these things and all the Ministries have been consulted on this. We have had consultations with the lawyers, accountants and also the UNDP. Basically, when the honourable Minister went the last time, I know he was very well armed with respect to ensuring that all the consultative processes had taken place.

One of the most important part of this particular IPEF infrastructure, Sir, and I am sure the honourable Minister will explain, is that we also get to a stage where there is support being given to particular infrastructure projects and these projects could mean some rural infrastructure projects, funding support, whether it is to do with garbage refuse, whether it is to do with Water Authority, whether it is to do with zero carbon, et cetera.

As I said, it has many tentacles that touches every part of every Fijian's lives. There are many hydro projects, so projects that may come out of this and it is being wholeheartedly supported. There is a Climate Tech Trek also that exists within it. I understand the Ministry has submitted quite a few projects onto that particular site where they may get assistance. I think someone already has begun. There are some female entrepreneurs who were ready to be assisted, but I am not sure how far that has gone, but that was from the private sector. It is not just the Governments that were involved in this, some of the large US tech companies are actually part and parcel of it. They provide training, et cetera, for many of our SMEs that want to be a part of it.

Mr. Speaker, that is a bit of a background on it, what people must realise is as I said right from the beginning, this is massively beneficial for Fiji and this is why you saw me stand up and second the motion and support this. We know that this is very important and the way forward in this,

following the substantive conclusion of the agreement, upon the conclusion of this legal review of this Agreement, IPEF members are undertaking their domestic processes, we will have to do so also for signature ratification, et cetera. I understand it has been scheduled for the 5th and 6th June in Singapore. In this regard actually we are wholeheartedly supporting the Minister going across to ensure that the ratification process take place.

Mr. Speaker, the framework is a significant step also in our regional cooperation. It promotes our economic prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region and it actually enhances Fiji's international standing. You can be assured, Sir, that every person that actually goes there feels extremely proud because we are a massive company, the only Small Island Developing State that was invited to sit at the front table to do this work.

It is a big tick for Fiji. This agreement will continue to dedicate and advancing the economic interest of prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region for all of us. Well wishes to the honourable Minister for the ratification process. We are wholeheartedly supporting this. I know there are one or two other speakers from this side who want to support it. Best wishes to you, honourable Minister and full support from our side.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the motion that is before Parliament and also to thank the honourable Koya for seconding the motion. It is obvious that he is the only one qualified to second this motion as he had done a lot of work in the initiation of the work that has led to us debating this motion before us today.

On 23rd May, 2022, leaders from 14 Indo-Pacific countries announced the start of talks towards launching negotiations on the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity. Fiji fully supports the vision of a greener global economy, as articulated under IPEF. That aligns with the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, emphasising the need for nations to coexist peacefully and to collaborate on trans-boundary issues, including climate change. To realise this vision and respond to climate change, substantial investment in infrastructure and innovation is imperative.

Our firsthand experience with the effects of the climate crisis underscores the urgent need for coordinated action. Investment in resilient trade-related infrastructure, such as the Trans-Pacific Submarine Cables being installed by Google is crucial for our economic growth and regional economic integration. The agreements forged and partnerships established through IPEF are pivotal to enhancing our integration into the global economy and advancing the goals of the Blue Pacific Continent. The IPEF Agreement, Mr. Speaker, Sir, recognises the different levels of economic development and capacity constraints of IPEF member countries and makes technical assistance and capacity building an integral part of IPEF.

The Ministerial Statement that honourable Koya delivered also acknowledge and seek to address the challenges linked with maritime connectivity which is also critical to Fiji. I acknowledge, honourable Faiyaz Koya for his participation in the formulation of Ministerial Statements in September 2022 in Los Angeles, USA.

I acknowledge the efforts of the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade honourable Manoa Kamikamica in taking up the mantle and continuing IPEF negotiations over the last 17 months. Some do not agree with acknowledging the work of previous governments but that is a short-sighted view because the duty of each successive government is to build on the achievements of previous governments - after all, none of us will rule forever.

As Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, upon invitation from President Joe Biden, I joined the APEC Summit held in San Francisco in November 2023. At that meeting, IPEF partners

announced the substantial conclusion of negotiations on the Clean Economy Agreement, Fair Economy Agreement and the Over-arching Agreement for IPEF.

The first IPEC agreement on Supply Chain was negotiated in May 2023. Together with IPEC partners, Fiji signed the IPEC Supply Chain Agreement in November 2023 after it was unanimously approved by this august Parliament in September 2023. The motion before Parliament today relates to the Over-arching Trade Agreement for IPEF, and the other two pillars on Clean Economy Agreement and the Fair Economy Agreement.

To formalise the partnership and ensure that a durable structure exists for future cooperation at the Ministerial level, the IPEF Partners negotiated an overarching agreement on the IPEF. That overarching agreement establishes an IPEF Council and Joint Commission. The IPEF Council will consider matters affecting the collective operation of the agreements as well as considering the possibility of adding new members or new agreements. The Joint Commission will monitor work under the agreements to identify ways to reduce duplication and potential conflicts and enable work between or across those agreements.

To ensure the effective implementation of IPEF initiatives, Fiji will establish a special Implementation Body at the national level, involving both private and public sector stakeholders. The Implementation Body will then commence preparatory work to fully participate under the IPEF Agreements, including through private sector engagement and proper planning for the utilisation of technical assistance and capacity building activities provided under the Treaty.

In conclusion Mr. Speaker, Sir, the ratification of the Overarching IPEF Agreement, the Clean Economy Agreement and the Fair Economy Agreements are timely and imperative. We find ourselves at a juncture where adapting to changing circumstances and ensuring the effectiveness of policies is of paramount importance.

As we navigate the complexities of open market trade policies, escalating maintenance costs, and the profound economic impact of COVID-19, it becomes evident that our trade criteria must evolve to better serve, not only our nation as a whole but our partners and stakeholders who play a huge role in ensuring our success. I invite all honorable Members to support and engage constructively in this process, as we must together ensure that our trade policies remain responsive, inclusive, fair, and sustainable, serving the best interests of our beloved nation and its people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the motion to the Parliament. May we continue to work collaboratively for the betterment of Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- I must apologise that we never offered you the, these are two new ones for your information. It was sighted by honourable Naupoto during our trip to Australia. So, we had them made help few honourable Member in delivering their speeches. It is just lying there. Maybe we have been having a change of our Orderlies on this side since the passing of Lemeki. Again, *vinaka vakalevu* and before I offer the floor to honourable Premila Kumar, can I just do some housekeeping here and this is another suspension.

(Laughter)

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 4.30 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, we are still on number one in the Motions for Debate on Schedule Two on the IPEF and there is another two to go regarding the review of the Ministry of Sugar 2016-2020 Annual Reports and of course the Republic of Fiji Parliament Annual Report.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion, if any.

HON. MEMBERS.- No.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Sir, I do not have any further comments to add but look forward to the debate by my honourable colleague beside me.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE RATIFICATION OF THE INDO-PACIFIC ECONOMIC FRAMEWORK

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for giving this opportunity to speak on the motion. After COVID-19, the Global Trade Landscape, consumers and businesses all faced numerous challenges. We all witnessed geopolitical tension which is still continuing globally but we have just recently seen the tension in New Caledonia, disruption to the supply chain which pushed the prices and as a small country we had no say. We could do nothing about it. We were takers in this game. Shortages of labour globally which created movement of workers across the nations and high inflation rate and of course high cost of living.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework is designed to tackle these global challenges that require coordinated effort and when we talk about supply chain issues, definitely a single country cannot work against multinationals who are very powerful and they have lot more money and lot more clout to do what they want to do internationally. The IPEF aims to enhance economic ties and cooperation across the Indo-Pacific region to ensure sustainable economic growth, environmental stewardship and fair market practises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my reasons for supporting this motion are many but I will dwell into few areas only. The Indo-Pacific region is a critical hub for global trade and economic activities. The countries that are involved or you can say the pioneers of developing this particular framework or engaged in producing this framework are USA and many other countries that join later on like India, Japan, Australia and Singapore. They are the powerhouse for innovation, no doubt about that. By participating in the IPEF, Fiji can have access to new opportunities for trade and investment that can lead to economic growth and can also contribute to improving the quality of life for our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Clean Economy Agreement within the IPEF will assist nations to address the urgent challenges of climate change. Fiji has been a champion of climate change. This is another opportunity for us to look at the innovative practices and how we can utilise this within our nation.

This Agreement encourages countries to adopt renewable energy. We already have our National Energy Policy and in that Policy, we are talking about achieving 100 percent renewable energy by 2030. Reducing carbon emission and investing in green technology which is the new way forward for industries.

The Clean Economy Agreement will promote sustainable practices which industries need to adopt. We have heard from the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation not too long ago about the Aviation Industry is moving towards the use of clean and green fuel. These initiatives not only protect our planet, but also open up new avenues for economic growth and job creation in emerging green sectors.

We have also heard from the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry on the establishment of an ethanol plant in Rakiraki. These are all helping towards achieving the clean green environment. However, the question would be for honourable Singh whether we have enough cane to produce ethanol; that is another matter for discussion at a later time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fair Economy Agreement is the foundation of the IPEF, ensuring fair labour practices and promoting gender equality and inclusivity in the workplace which is extremely crucial. The Fair Economy Agreement aims to build a more just and inclusive economic landscape. We all know the exploitation of cheap labour in making designer goods which are later sold at exorbitant prices, and we hope that, at least, this Agreement will create a level playing field for the signatories.

The IPEF will foster stronger strategic partnership when it comes to addressing common challenges such as cyber security, tax administration, addressing corruption, or even diffusing geopolitical tension through dialogue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, by embracing this framework, Fiji will commit to building a future that is economically robust, environmentally sustainable and socially equitable, with an opportunity to work together for the prosperity and wellbeing of our future generations and above all, this particular Agreement will also assist Fiji in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

With that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, once again, thank you for this opportunity and I support the motion before Parliament. I also wish the honourable Minister all the best. I know he is in a hurry to go to Singapore, you have our blessings, and thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot has been said from both sides of Parliament. We cannot underestimate the true value of this and I acknowledge the contribution from the other side. It expresses the sentiment of this Parliament and the people of Fiji.

Sir, I endorse, Sir, the ratification of the Treaty.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will keep it brief as well. Again, this is very, very important for Fiji and this is an opportunity that we need to seize, given the benefits that this will bring to us. Again, let me assure the honourable Minister that we have had very good discussions with the team, and again, we will continue to offer our assistance where it is needed and, of course, the experience and the expertise that we have on this side of Parliament as well. That is still on offer, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

On the Global Supply Chain that has been ratified already in November last year, again, this is very, very important, Mr. Speaker, Sir. You would recall that in the recent IPU Meeting on the presentation by WHO, as they are doing the Pandemic Treaty in Geneva, I do not know how far that

has progressed but the Ministry of Health was there, Sir, and this is one of the main issues - supply chain.

We encountered a lot of difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic. I know for the fact that there was an incident in which we sought the assistance of the Australian Government when the reactants that were needed in the lab were channelled to another country.

However, we are thankful to the Minister for Foreign Affairs in Australia, Senator Marise Payne, who assisted us. Again, going back to honourable Professor Prasad's response to the questions today, although this is an Agreement but going back to SDG 17, the partnership for the goals, this is very important for us as small countries.

Again, I keep referring to the vulnerability of Small Islands Developing States. Now, there is going to be a meeting in Antigua and Barbuda, there is a lot of questions about multilateralism but now that we are signing with the big boys in this IPEF Agreement, this will be very, very good for us, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I will just probably touch on Pillar 3 – Clean Economy Agreement. We had some very good discussions, honourable Minister, with the Permanent Secretary, particularly on the issue of the IPEF Clean Economy Agreement which is a largely non-binding economic framework that supports the efforts of IPEF countries in achieving their respective climate goals.

It aims to accelerate the deployment of clean technologies and facilitate investment. Of course, the objectives of it, I will not go into the details but in the discussions, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we clearly explained to the team why it is crafted as such, because I linked that to the Paris Agreement Article 2.2 which reads:

“This Agreement will be implemented to reflect equity and the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capacities, in the light of different national circumstances.”

This is where this Agreement is linked to the Paris Agreement. This is one of the issues that will be continuously raised, particularly when it comes to big economies. I know India's position, this is because of the common but differentiated responsibilities. On one extreme, they are far ahead in terms of development but on the other extreme, there are still people in rural India who need electricity, there are still people in rural India who need other forms of development, including environmental issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is why the common but differentiated responsibilities will always be linked to most of these Agreements post-2015 Paris Agreement. But there are opportunities for us in this, particularly our access to technology and the best practices. This is something, honourable Minister, that we also had some very good discussions with the team.

At the Intercontinental Resort, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have talked about how the Chinese Chief Negotiator gave his advice to Fiji about our approaches to such negotiations. We have a big list, but we will have to prioritise. I think what is important for Fiji as well is the scoping - the details, because as I stated, the Chinese will say, “Oh, you talk a lot but where is your plan?”

When we are working on this as the operationalisation of this Agreement when it comes into force, hopefully, because this is under the Biden Administration, that is a big question mark as well because of the Election that is coming up. But, hopefully, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that does not stop us from making the necessary arrangements, particularly when we want to go to our partners, we must

have our lists ready, even to the extent, if we have to ask for people who will need to help us in terms of drafting our requests, and do the technical scoping, it will be very, very important for us.

One thing that we also discussed with the technical team, Sir, when it comes to private sector participation, particularly in climate-related issues, one thing that is lacking in the Pacific is scale. This is probably something that Fiji needs to consider, because what will attract private investors is economy of scale. This is why we established the Pacific Hub under the climate change when we were in the Presidency of COP, so that when it comes to scoping of projects, when it comes to enticing private sector investments in the climate space projects, they will be after the economy of scale, and this is something we have already discussed.

Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as alluded to by our colleagues, we wish the Ministry all the very best and we acknowledge the hardworking staff in the Ministry. For us, we really need to look at our capacity issues.

We are thankful to the UN agencies that are helping us when it comes to the limitation in our capacities. Hopefully, apart from trade and the benefits, we will access new technology, new innovations and it will lift us to another level, Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the statements that have already been given also in this Parliament during the course of Parliament this week. We support the motion.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to support Fiji's participation in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF). The decision in Parliament to ratify the - Overarching Agreement, the Clean Economy Agreement and the Fair Economy Agreement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot has been said in this Parliament and I suppose, I would be repeating a lot of the good contributions that had been made before me, including that of the honourable Prime Minister, in terms of this very important Agreement for Fiji. What I will do, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is just contextualise what IPEF could potentially mean for Fiji and, more importantly, what is being done to actually get some of the benefits out of these Agreements.

Mr. Speaker, at 12 o'clock today, I excused myself to go to a lunch with about 14 US Businessman, who have come to Fiji to attend the infrastructure meeting that is held in Nadi over the next two days. That is a direct result of IPEF Agreement. Sir, this Agreement from what I can see is not just a lot of words on a piece of paper, as most of these Agreements are. What I can see is that amongst the members, there is a lot of activity that is already happening. Billions and billions of dollars have been signed in terms of Agreements between countries to actually activate respective economies.

From that perspective, we thank the previous Government, the former Prime Minister and honourable Koya, for tapping me on the shoulder when I first got into office and reminded me to have a look at this Agreement because it is very good for Fiji. Sir, I can say that this Agreement is geared towards action. It is geared towards actually getting things done, and that is quite different from some of the trade agreements or some of the other Agreements that we see around the place.

Basically, the structure of Agreement has been explained. The Agreement is quite unusual, Sir, because it has four pillars and then an over-arching Agreement that monitors the four pillars. Because of the speed with which the negotiation was happening, there was a decision taken to come to the respective governments after the negotiation of certain pillars which is why we agreed collectively on the supply chain pillar. We now have a Clean Economy Agreement and also the Fair Economy Agreement Pillars in front of us. This is why the Agreement has come in this manner.

Sir, one of the other things that is going to be very beneficial for Fiji is particularly from my perspective as the honourable Minister for Trade is that part of the mandate that I saw when I got into this role is to try and really genuinely diversify the Fiji economy and actually leverage every single opportunity that we have to actually deliver a diversified economy.

Some can argue, Sir, that even the Google Investment is probably one of the early harvests of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. It has gotten visibility in Washington, from that alone through Fiji, the whole Pacific will be transformed in terms of technology and access. Mr. Speaker, Sir, each single Pacific country I believe will have a second cable into their countries creating redundancy across the Pacific.

So, that again, Sir, this is why I am saying this Agreement is not like other Agreements. It actually has teeth and is starting to gain momentum. We have big ambitions on Climate Change, Sir. This Agreement actually positions us to actually start seeking opportunities for access to finance, technical assistance, capacity building to allow us to implement renewable energy projects and develop the necessary expertise.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, there is the Singapore meeting that I referred to earlier is the inaugural Clean Economy in the national forum which is going to be held in Singapore in early June. I invite honourable Premila Kumar if she would like to attend as well.

Sir, this is why I am saying this Agreement is important. The most important thing to note is that the investment forum has asked for a list of projects from the Pacific. It includes seven large infrastructure related projects in Rural Electrification, Landfill Hydro Energy, Waterways Treatment, Green Marine Transportation, Blue Shipping for possible farming amounting to about \$300 million in terms of potential investment. So, this is again some of the things that are coming out from this Agreement.

In addition to that, Sir, they also have asked us to submit applications for SMEs that will have climate focus our businesses. So, there is a list of 24 SMEs that we have put together and they will be part of the list that has already gone to Singapore. I am hopeful that we can at least get some investment attraction from these opportunities.

As mentioned by the honourable Members on both sides, the fair economy component of this Agreement is very important, Sir. As we move forward it will be very important that we ensure that transparency in terms of tax administration and other necessary legal frameworks are there to in order to attract investment to Fiji.

One of the things also, Sir, that will ultimately, I am hoping will result out of that is that it will actually raise the standards in terms of all our current regulatory frameworks. We will actually start to move into the sphere of the larger countries. Sir, if that happens in terms of investment perception, Fiji becomes a different kind of preposition in terms of the global playfield. That again is another significant reason why this Agreement is very important to the country.

Finally, it goes without saying that there needs to be acknowledgement as well on the Trade Ministry and the team in the Trade Office. As correctly mentioned by honourable Koya they are a very young team but they fight like hell when it comes to Fiji. To be honest, Sir, one of the things that have come out from this whole negotiation is Fiji holds its own when it comes to trade negotiations. We do not hold back, a lot of the benefits and disagreement particularly the technical assistance and technical cooperation is due to Fiji's vocal push to get these things in and pushing the small country perspective.

On that basis I thank the team in the Ministry and the Permanent Secretary for all their hard work and we should be proud, and I am glad that I will go to Singapore and say that this was a bipartisan agreement and will not only a one-sided Agreement. In the years to come, I am hoping that the IPEF Agreement will certainly set the platform for the building of the economic architecture in Fiji and also ensuring that we do achieve an economy that is diversified and can address the needs of all our people.

MR. SPEAKER.- You were mentioned in the list of speakers, that is why I called you earlier on. The way you gave your response, it kind of struck me that you were making your Right of Reply. Sorry about that honourable Attorney-General.

Honourable Whip, how was his name included in the list when he is the mover of the motion?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- He was distracted, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Further distraction.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- I am grateful to be given the opportunity to be the last to speak and express the gratitude of the Government to the people of Fiji and, of course, civil servants. We are here reaping the hard work of those before us and we will continue to do so. I support the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I intend to adjourn the Parliament now for afternoon tea.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.29 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 5.07 p.m.

REVIEW REPORT – MINISTRY OF SUGAR 2016-2020 ANNUAL REPORTS

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Review Report of the Ministry of Sugar 2016–2017, 2017–2018, 2018–2019 and 2019–2020 Annual Reports which was tabled on 17th April, 2024.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a background, the Ministry of Sugar has an important role in Fiji's economy through the formulation and implementation of Government key policies in the Sugarcane Industry, at the same time monitor their implementation of the Sugarcane Industry Reforms. It consults and ensures harmony within the Sugar Industry by bringing the stakeholders to work together. This includes the Fiji Sugar Corporation, Sugar Cane Growers Council, Sugar Industry Tribunal, Sugar Cane Growers Fund, Sugar Research Institute of Fiji, South Pacific Fertilizers and landlords such as the iTLTB and Lands Department.

Key highlights: Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the years under review, the Committee noted that few highlights of the Ministry of Sugar:

1. Provision of Sugarcane Development and Farmers Assistance to enhance cane planting to increase cane production.
2. Weedicide subsidy provided to cane growers to subsidise weedicide cost of diuron, amine, glyphosate and valpar.
3. Cane Access Road, assistance were provided to improve cane access road transportation infrastructure to enhance efficient delivery of cane to the mills and reduce stand-over cane.
4. Fertilizer Subsidy, initiative to subsidise fertiliser cost for farmers at \$14.09 per bag until 2016 and 2017, was \$25.59 from 2017 to 2018 and \$60 from April 2022.
5. Assistance to farmers; provision of grants to farmers for securing land and to establish cane farms.

As part of the Committee's findings and recommendations, the Committee had highlighted the following:

1. The Committee noted that the Sugar Industry faced a shortage of skilled labour during the periods under review because of step migration from rural to urban areas while others moved to overseas or venture into non-sugar agricultural farming and some sugarcane farmers either abandoned or sold their farms as they are too old to continue farming and their children had opted for white collar job in urban areas or move overseas.

The Committee recommends that the Ministry of Sugar Industry engage in comprehensive dialogue with stakeholders in the sugar sector to address the structural issues affecting the industry, particularly land lease issues, acute shortage of labour, excessive burning of cane and the Cane Payment System.

2. The Committee noted that the Annual Reports presented by the Ministry of Sugar lacked essential data during the periods under review which would enable the

Committee to make more informed recommendations. The Ministry of Sugar needs to set a key target of achieving two million tonnes of sugarcane to breakeven.

The Committee recommends the Ministry of Sugar to develop relevant Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) collectively with respective organisations within the Sugar sector to achieve the target.

3. The Committee noted that transporting cane through rails would be far more cost effective than through trucks which required more fuel. It would also relieve road congestion and damage caused by cane trucks.

The Committee recommends that the Ministry of Sugar work with the Ministry of Finance to explore the establishment of a multi-purpose railway system to cater for cane cartage and other goods and services.

With that being said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion before Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion and I have in front of me the list of speakers. They will speak in the following order:

1. Hon. S. Nand;
2. Hon. Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry;
3. Hon. A. A. Maharaj; and
4. Hon. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the Report being discussed. Before I start, I would like to urge honourable Members on the Government side to note that it is almost 18 months since they have been in power so, please, takes some ownership of the issues and stop blaming the previous Government for your inability to deliver.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the recommendations recommended by the Committee was that the Ministry of Sugar Industry to engage in comprehensive dialogue with the stakeholders in sugar sectors to address structural issues affecting the industry, particularly land lease issues, actual shortage of labour, excessive burning of cane and Cane Payment System. However, it fails to include Mill efficiency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am reliably told that the average TCTS for the last season was around 11 tonnes. Will the Minister be able to explain this? This is very poor and it is the direct result of inefficient extraction under his leadership. Processing delays and mill breakdowns is, obviously, a contributing factor. Improving milling infrastructure and optimizing process efficiency is crucial to reduce TCTS and improving overall sugar production.

One of the problems, Mr. Speaker, Sir, encountered by our farmers is limited access to resources. Cane farmers often lack access to resources, such as farm capital and technology. This limits their ability to invest in modern farming techniques, leading to lower productivity. Land tenure issues continue to top the list.

Infrastructure on the farm, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a major challenge. This includes farm loads and farm bridges and overuse or underuse of fertilizers. A lot of our farmers are not aware of the soil PH on their farm, thus are not sure of how much fertilizer is needed on the farm.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, climate change is another factor. Another problem faced by the farmers in the Sugar Industry is the aging farmers. It is difficult to attract the young generation to get into sugarcane farming. Attracting young farmers to sugarcane farming can be a challenging factor and is crucial for the sustainability and future of the industry.

However, this can be done if you:

- Provide educational and training programmes for our young generation on how to work smart on the farms, not work hard.
- Provide financial support and incentives. I believe this Government is already providing some of these, but I request them to enhance the programme.
- Assist our farmers in getting land leases secured. Security of land will encourage them to invest on the farm.
- Continue to encourage and assist in the introduction of technology on the farm. This will greatly reduce the dependency on hired labour on the farm.
- Provide opportunities for mentoring and networking to our farmers, especially to the younger generation. This networking provides a continuous learning opportunity for our farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, cane farming, like any other commercial farming, is a business. The objective of the business is to make money. Are the cane farmers making money? Is the honourable Minister aware of how much it costs to produce a tonne of cane?

If not, I urge him to get his people to do that. Typical cost for a farmer includes; land preparation, seed materials, fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, machinery, transportation, other miscellaneous costs like, land lease, and labour. Not only the paid labour which the honourable Minister is so often proud of in getting labourers from Bangladesh, but the man hours, the farmer and the farmers' family put into the farm. These all needs to be factored in. A farmer merely makes \$10 to \$20 a tonne of cane, so a farmer who produces around 300 tonnes of cane gets paid between \$3,000 and \$6,000 a year - that too, after six months.

I urge all our cane farmers who are listening to, please, continue doing cane farming but, please, diversify. If you diversify or intercrop, then only you can make money. They need to start cultivating other crops, together with sugarcane. Doing this, will mitigate any risks associated with loss of income due to poor yield. It will also provide them with additional income for sustainability.

Diversification or inter-cropping also improve the soil health and will reduce the dependency on fertilizer. Farmers will be able to value add to their diversified crops to get extra income, like maize flour from the maize. Please, work smart, farm smart, diversify and get that extra income that your farm needs.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to carry out a whole of industry inquiry. All agencies responsible for the production of sugar in Fiji need to be strategically looked at and improvements identified. It has to be a holistic approach. Individually looking at the farmers or the miller will not work. All the industries, the sectors and all the stakeholders involved in the production of sugarcane in Fiji needs to be holistically looked at and recommended to improve production.

With that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, firstly, I would like to talk about TCTS, as it was mentioned.

Mr. Speaker, there was a stakeholder's meeting last week in Lautoka where almost 200 people right from the Sugar Cane Growers Council, farmers, Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC), you name it, attended. One of the things that we were concerned about is the very high TCTS in the Mills. It is not because of the mill inefficiency, but it is because of the sucrose content when the cane is out there. That is why the extraction of sugar is not coming out right. So, we have to come back and plant varieties of cane that has more sucrose content.

Mr. Speaker, I support this Report. I had earlier mentioned in Parliament that the Report is from 2016 to 2020. We are in 2024.

(Honourable Opposition Member interjects)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- It is going to come.

What I am saying is, why are we trying to flog a dead horse here with this Report? So, I urge the Committee to come out as fast as possible and scrutinise all the current Annual Reports - 2021, 2022 and 2023, and bring it to us as soon as possible.

Mr. Speaker, firstly, I would like to commend my hardworking staff at the Ministry of Sugar Industry for putting together these four years Annual Report under review. In the same period, my Ministry has also tabled 2016 to 2020 Annual Reports of Fiji Sugar Corporation, Sugarcane Growers Fund, Sugarcane Growers Council and Sugar Research Institute of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, from when the Ministry was established until todate, the responsibilities of the Ministry have significantly increased without any relative increase in the number of staff in the Ministry. The Ministry's budget has increased over time, with more capital programmes to support the sugar industry, coordinated by the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the review of 2016-2017 and 2019-2020, a total of \$281 million was allocated to the Ministry. Approximately 98 percent of this amount was allocated for grants to support the sugar industry, while only 2 percent was the Ministry's operational expense which also included salaries and wages for the 10 staff who were employed by the Ministry. This is an indication of the maximum utilization of funds to benefit the cane growers and the sugar industry.

Mr. Speaker, in this financial year (2023-2024), a total of 13 capital programmes were approved by the Government to support the sugar industry with the total capital grant of \$44.5 million.

The Funds Programme aims to increase the cane production through farm mechanisation, cane planting assistance, subsidising input cost, upgrading cane access roads and assisting the new farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the first time ever, the Ministry has introduced two new programmes which are the Farmer's Incentive and Support for Manual Harvesting and Farmers Incentive which is a direct reward to cane growers who have increased their tonnage of cane where the grower has directly received \$5 per tonne on the increase of cane harvesting.

Manual Harvesting Programme supported those growers that hired labors had to harvest again manually and the Ministry has paid \$1 per tonne of the manual harvested cane direct to the grower. A total of 4,924 farmers received a payment under the Farmers Incentive Programme while 8,336 farmers were paid under the Manual Harvesting Programme. We are exploring all avenues to increase the cane production and sustain the sugar industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our sugar industry is confronted with wide issues of socio-economic and environmental forces. These challenges must be well understood in order to appreciate the level of performance of the industry. We have set targets in sugar production to be achieved and we are waiting through these challenges to achieve our targets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite these challenges my Ministry in collaboration with the Government is trying all its efforts to re-establish a platform for the industry to grow and sustain itself as it was during its glory days before. A Committee was established to look into the land issues on the land expiry of leases and non-proclamation of leased, agricultural land and renewal of leases. For this financial year, a total of \$2 million was allocated to assist those growers wishing to renew their leases.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are thankful for the support through the government of India. Recently, a technical assessment team from India had visited our sugar mills and inspected the railway network to ascertain the scope of repairing works required. This visit is in line with the industry's plan of fixing the railway system in Fiji, preparing the sugar mill and reconstruction of the Rakiraki sugar mill.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not know whose grand idea was in the previous government to dismantle and take away the Rakiraki Sugar Mill.

HON. P.K. BALA.- *Cyclone Winston.*

HON. C.J. SINGH.- *Cyclone Winston* only damaged and there was a cost for repairing of \$10 million. That is because of your doing, if we had to put a new mill, a brand-new mill will cost \$215 million.

HON. P.K. BALA.- So, do it.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- We will do it. The blunder you made, because of that, this country had to spend \$215 million. Mr. Speaker, Sir, proper planning and strategic realignment of the efforts to bolster the industry is ongoing. In collaboration with the stakeholders the industry has provided targets and goals with the relevant policies as the industry submission should be reviewed in the National Development Plan. Based on the targets, all sugar institutions should provide a plan of action to achieve the broad targets of the sugar industry. We will continue consulting with the international partners and the sugar producing countries to identify areas of strengthening growth of a sugar industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is worth noting and I must highlight in this august Parliament that my Ministry takes pride in supporting our female cane growers. Through a new farmer's programme, we have been assisting female individuals who wish to pursue cane farming. As to-date, we have 61 registered and active female cane growers here. There are some highly successful female cane growers who are producing more than 300 tonnes of cane, they own cane lorries and other machineries. Recently, for the first time we have also sent four male farmers to India to receive training for their capacity building.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, mechanisation and cane production is a way to move forward to achieve economies of scale in the sugar industry. This is what other countries have adopted to mechanise all operations for the sugar supply chain including venturing into artificial intelligence to bring efficiency and tackle labor challenges. A total of \$0.5 million was allocated by the Government to support the acquisition of machineries and technologies that will support cane production. With this funding the Ministry in collaboration with FSC is acquiring planting machines, fertilizer machines, weedicide applicators and exploring drones to be brought to Fiji. The work is progressing on setting

up a GIS system to digitize farms that will support monitoring of field activities and enhance efficiency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, labour shortages and reduced cane planting remains a notable issue of the sugar industry nevertheless the solution to address these issues remains within our beloved nation. We are exporting labour imports from Bangladesh and further updates to be provided as we progress.

The sugar industry has been and will continue to contribute immensely towards economic growth and development of nation building. The sector is imploring to landowners with vacant land to joint-venture with FSC and plant cane on a large commercial scale on vacant lands. This is a successful story of a landowning unit joint venture with FSC. Based on these remarks, I therefore, support this motion.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as requested, I would like to speak in Hindi.

MR. SPEAKER.- You may do so.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Requesting if time can be stopped while honourable Members are wearing their headphones. *Aaj hum log ke samaksh mei jon report hum log ke paas hai, bahut important hai ki ee report ke baare mein hindi mei baat kari, kahe ki kaafi kisan logan aisan hai jon hindi samjhe. Aur bahut aisan cheez logan hai jon hum log ke samjhaye mei easy padi agar hum hindi mei aaj baat karega aur kisan log ke samjhe mein easy padi.*

Ee jon ganna ke mantralay hai, ee koi chhota mantralay nahi hai aur chhota industry nahi hai. Iske baare mein hum log 1970 se baat karta hai, aur ee aisan ek industry hai jon dheere dheere neeche jaye. Agar maan jaye toh ee baat Minister bhi sake agree kare ki Fiji mei khali 40 percent aisan farmers hai jon 100 tonne se kamti ganna nikale, aur kareeban 60 percent aisan kisan logan hai jon lagbhag 150 tonne se kamti ganna nikale. Over time, ee cheez dheere dheere kamti hote gaye hai. Hum log previous government ke, SDL government ke, SVT government ke aur FIjiFirst government ke blame kare mei koi fayda nahi hai ab. Jon fundamental issues hai hum log ke uu sab address kare ke padi. Aur jon issues logan hai, jayse ki, hum batai: Abhi people log ganna kahe boye, kahe ki uu log ke ghar usme hai. Agar ganna boyla band kar din, uu log ke ghar ukhaad ke jaye ke par jayi. FijiFirst ek policy leke aais raha jaha pe people logan ganna nahi sake boye jon log ke ladkan overseas chal din hai, jon log ke ladkan master-teacher ban gayin hai. Jon log ab kisaani nahi maange kare ganna ke khet mei, uu log sake apan jameen surrender kar ke at least TLTB uu log ke ¼ acre residential lease de dai. Agar Minister sake uu cheez pe emphasise kare ki ee la policy abhi le kaha gayis hai, kahe ki andhruni jagah jaao jaha pe ganna bowaye hai, kaafi jagah pe aaj kal ek admi aur aurat khali bachin hai jon ganna kaat ke bhare hai gaadi mei. Uu log lorry mei nahi sake bhare, kahe ki labour nahi mile hai. Aur pahaad pe ganna bowaye hai toh iske karan se uu log mechanical harvester nahi sake use kare. Ee ek reason hai ki kon karan se hum log mangta raha industrial hemp introduce kare. Mehnat kamti raheta, paisa jaada raheta. Abhi mehnat jaada hoy gaye hai, paisa kamti hoy gaye hai. Agar koi 100 tonne ganna boye hai, agar hum log uu log ke \$100 fir de laga, \$10,000 paisa hoye hai. Hum log ke timepe jab hum log fixed guaranteed price deta raha, \$85 deta raha, uu time fir khali \$8,500 hota raha.

Ganna boye ke cost itna high hoy gayis hai ki agar \$5,000 cost nikaal do, ek kisaan \$3,500 ek saal me apan ghar kaese chalayi. Agar hum bolta \$3,500 ek tonne ganna ke agar bota hai, toh 60 percent kisaan logan toh 150 tonne khali ganna boye hai. Toh uu log ke \$3500, 100 tonne ganna agar bota hai toh 60 percent kisaan logan 150 tonne khali ganna boye hai. Toh uu log ke lagbhag ek saal mei gire se gire \$5000 ya \$6000 paisa mili. Jab cheez ke mahengai itna upar jaaye hai, sab cheez ke daam badhe hai, \$6000 mei hum log kaese sakta expect kare ki dui parani apan ghar chalaiye. Aaj kal ke duniya mein \$6000 paisa kuch nahi hai.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, *hum log ke honourable Minister, last Parliament sitting mein batais raha ki ganna ke chinni ke global market price abhi \$2000 hai. Abhi batais \$2000. Mr. Speaker, Sir, TCF, TCTS ratio agar abhi jaese uu batais hai, 1:11. Agar 1:11 se calculate karega, ek tonne ganna ke daam \$181 aawe. Aaj ke jon ratio aap bataye hai uske anusar \$181 aawe. Usmei se agar 30 percent jon miller cost hai, uu la nikaal do, jon ki \$54.54 hoi, fir bhi \$127 aawe. Honourable Minister last crushing season mei dis raha \$92. Hum log ka jaane ki jon \$36 ke short fall hai, uu paisa kaha gayis. Hum log ke time pe jab \$55 chini ke daam raha, usmei se agar 30 percent nikaalo \$16.50, \$38.50 aata raha. Hum log uske \$46.50 se top up kar ke \$85 deta raha.*

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Interjects (inaudible)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- *Sun lo, sun lo, hindi mei samjhata hai, sun lo thora! Yahi toh problem hai sunta nahi hai tum. Mr. Speaker, Sir, hum log \$46.50 top up kar ke \$85 deta raha. Jonchi ek baar ya do baar COVID-19 ke baad mei hum log bataye raha jon industrial cost hai, \$2.50 jab hum log minus kara raha uu time, toh Opposition kitna halla karis raha ee Parliament mein, \$2.50 ke liye, aur ee jon \$36 ke shortfall hai, uu maange honourable Minister bhi justify kare- \$36 kaha aur \$2.50 kaha.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, *jab yahi cheez hum hindi mei people log ke explain kara, toh ek political party batais ki hum Hindustani mei people log ke mislead kara. Hindustani bhasha nahi hai, Hindustani jaat hai. Hindustan se jon aawe uu log ke Hindustani bola jaaye hai. Bharat se ayega bhartiye boliye, Pakistan se aayega Pakistani boliye, Hindustani ke bhasha hindi hai, utna samjhe ke chahi. Aur utna nahi samajh paain. Lately abhi konchi bhaye hai, hum log honourable Members logan hai, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Dui honourable Members log ke aage ek party ke general secretary hum log ke idiot bolis, ki hum log idiot hai. Rakiraki mei bolis. Agar honourable Prasad waha par raheta, uske naitrik mein hum janta hai ki ee baat nahi hota. Uu leader nahi hon deta aisan baat, agar koi bolta fir uu maaf lewaye leta, kahe ki uske party mein kuch jan hai jon maaf maange mei bahut maahir hoy gayin hai.*

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, *shame on the honourable Members who were sitting there. ki uu log kuch nahi bolin. Ek Member ke toh fir bhi hum kuch nahi bolega. Honourable Agni Deo Singh hum aapke aaja bolta hai, aapke pota ke waha pe idiot bola gaye, aap kuch nahi bola. Ek dafa bhi aap Kamal Iyer ke nahi bola ki uu honourable Member hai, aisan open forum mein idiot nahi bolo.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, *humme bataya gaye hai idiot bolke ki hum aat saal se Parliament mei hai. Hum aat saal se nahi, huma nau aur aadha saal hoye gaye hai. Hum ee term khalas karega toh dus saal hoy jayi. Jon person humme idiot bolis hai aaj le uu Parliament mein as an honourable Member godh tak nahi dhar pais hai. Bahut important cheez hai. Agar hum log ee rakam aage peeche jaate rahega, hum log zindagi mein aage kabhi nahi badhega. Hum log apne katata hai. Hindustani danda leke paida bhaye hai, danda koche juta hai. Maaf karna but wahi cheez hoy hai. Hum log yaha try karta hai miljul ke kaam kare ke. Bahar, mil gaye danda, koch do. Dusran ke hith ke aage nahi badho, upar nahi chadho, apan balbute ke upar chadho.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, *ek aur clarification hai. Rakiraki Mill hum log nahi toda raha, hum log nahi hataya. Sab koi jaane, pura Fiji jaane kiske hum log pagla banaye. TC Winston Rakiraki Mill ke kon haalat pe kar dis raha. Aur abhi Rakiraki Mill se jon ganna Ba ya Lautoka aawe hai, kisaan log ek cent nahi bhare. U sarkar bhare hai. Hum ee sarkar ke bhi dhanyebaad deta hai ki kisaan log ke upar uu burden nahi hai.*

HON. C.J. SINGH.- \$7 million kharcha hoye hai, janta.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- *Bhare ke padi, aap sarkar mein hai. Hum log bharta raha, aap sarkar mein hai, aap bhi bharo. Aap ke kaam hai bhare la. Nahi sakta toh resign kar do. Honourable Minister for finance aapke paisa de hai, bharo kisaan log ke. Mr. Speaker, Sir, hum request karta hai ki ee jon sugar industry hai, jitna jan is mei hai, kareeban 250,000 people affect hoi agar sugarcane industry doob gaye. Hum log ke sathe mil ke sugar industry badhaye ke hai. Aur Opposition aur Government saathe mil ke hum log sakta hai sugar cane industry ke ubhar de. Hum log ke paas Committee hai. Committee ke chahi ek special inquiry baithao, Ministry ke madat karo taaki hum log ke jon kisaan logan hai uu log ke fayda hoy. Dhanyevaad.*

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I did not come into Parliament to hear this kind of stupidity. As the saying goes, ‘One cannot fix stupidity all the time’. It is actually quite hypocritical for honourable Maharaj to mislead Parliament and mislead the growers of this country, and to quite ironically make a point that he wanted to speak in Hindi. These were the very people sitting in the Opposition who were part of a Government, part of a political party, and part of an agenda to destroy our languages. It is this Government under this honourable Prime Minister, under your leadership, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we are allowed to speak in our vernacular languages.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They all have posted here. When he had an opportunity to support, he is talking about language. He does not even know. Someone said that he was talking about Hindustani, Pakistani and Afghanistan. Instead of saying Afghan, he said Afghanistani. There is no such word as Afghanistani in the video or somewhere.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is desperation. I know he made a video, and I will tell you why he was misleading about the price. He does not know how the sugar price per tonne of cane based on the international price of sugar, based on the 70-30 formula, based on the industry cost, based on the net proceeds, the final cane payment is decided. He got it completely wrong.

Someone showed me a video. He was like a little primary school teacher in a video, trying to put the formula.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- He was like a primary school teacher explaining to the children. When primary school teachers teach the kids, they actually do it right. They put the right formula, they make sure that the addition is right, the formula is right and the subtraction is right. He was putting these formulas without understanding ...

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, a Point of Order – Standing Order 74(1)(a). It says, and I quote:

“Any member may only raise a point of order if -

(a) there is an alleged breach of Standing Orders or practices of Parliament.”

Mr. Speaker, the honourable Member has discriminated primary schoolteachers. However, honourable Maharaj had explained in his video or to the citizens of Fiji that you cannot compare it to our primary school teachers. They are working hard to teach our young people. You cannot discriminate like that.

MR. SPEAKER.- You may continue, honourable Minister.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- As I have said, Mr. Speaker, one cannot fix stupidity and that is a good example.

All I was saying is that our primary school teachers, Mr. Speaker, can explain better than what honourable Maharaj was trying to explain in a video. That is what I am saying, Sir. This is the level of hypocrisy. I know, Mr. Speaker, he got it all completely wrong. He has put out his video. He is trying, he is weaving, doing this and trying to get something out of it, and he is thinking that by speaking in Hindi and, again, lying about the formulae, about how the final cane payment is decided.

Let me just also say, Mr. Speaker, the honourable Minister for Sugar had explained it very well in a very positive way. What are some of the things that we, as Government, are doing? In the last Budget, we provided \$49.7 million expenditure, of which \$44.5 million just went into capital expenditure.

If you look at the incentives that we provided, in fact, there are 13 programmes in the Ministry that provide direct support to farmers in the industry, of which eight major ones include; manual harvesting, sugarcane development farmers assistance, cane cartage, fertilizer subsidy, Sugar Stabilisation Fund, new farmers lease and premium assistance, and on top of those - in addition to that \$2 million allocation, the Government, under the leadership of the honourable Prime Minister, recently approved another additional \$1.2 million to pay the premium for 218 agricultural farmers.

The Government, Mr. Speaker, for the first time after so many years has taken the problems in the sugar industry head on. They talk about the history. Honourable Nand was talking about diversification. But let me just remind him; in 2006 before the *coup*, European Union had provided almost \$350 million and that was the first phase. The three components of the programme was for alternative livelihood, one was to fix the mills and one was to fix the farm level production efficiency of the sugarcane.

We lost millions and millions of dollars because of the *coup*, and also because there was a promise that the elections will be held in 2009 which never was held and the 1997 Constitution was abrogated.

Then, Mr. Speaker, we had *TC Winston* and the Rakiraki Mill that the honourable Minister talked about all the technical assessments after the destruction of their Mill showed that all Government had to do was put in \$5 million to fix the Mill at that time. They did not, because I do not know what kind of ideas they had.

When I asked the former Prime Minister in this Parliament, “what are you doing about cane leases in Seaqaqa where the farmers were struggling to pay their premiums?” He was the Chairman of iTLTB for so many years. Then they were in Government, but they did nothing.

It is this Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir that is now very clearly addressing the issues. We started the taskforce involving the Ministry of Lands, Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, iTLTB, Ministry of Sugar and the Ministry of Agriculture. That taskforce itself, Sir has been able to provide recommendations to fix the industry.

Honourable Nand was talking about cane farmers' income. What the honourable Minister said very clearly is that the incentives that are there is to increase the level of production. He said a farmer producing 300 tonnes or 400 tonnes will get \$5,000 or \$6,000 income.

At the last price, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a 300 tonne farmer or a 400 tonne producer will get \$36,000, if you take 60 percent of the cost.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- That is gross.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I know the difference between gross and net.

If you take away 60 percent of the cost, still that farmer will make about \$14,000 to \$15,000 net, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- How many of them?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This is the point, but they just do not understand what the honourable Minister said, that we are trying to raise the level of production, Mr. Speaker. So, my advice to honourable Maharaj is, he can now feel comfortable and we are very happy that he can speak in Hindi in this Parliament, and I invite them to speak more in Hindi and I will, next time, respond to them in Hindi. I will respond to them very well in Hindi. Honourable Bala speaks better Hindi, he will understand what it means because that is what they detested.

He is now talking about Indian farmers, Indo-Fijian farmers, because that was what they were doing when they were sitting on this side. When we were sitting on that side, any time we talked about the iTaukei problem, any time we discussed issues, it was seen as anti-Indian. So, in his own speech, Mr. Speaker, in Hindi was designed to create that impression.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Your time is up, Sir.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is the final point I wanted to make. That is the impression he created but he has failed miserably, and they will fail again and again to promote that kind of nonsense.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs to speak in reply.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we noted the various issues that has been brought about by honourable Members, relating to the industry - aging farmers, infrastructure...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S. TUBUNA.- ...land leases, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these challenges need to be addressed effectively if some semblance of turnaround can be contemplated. If the trend remains unchecked, then the decline in production for both, sugarcane and raw sugar would lead to a non-viable and a non-sustainable industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, out of the approximate 50,000 hectares of sugarcane land allocated for contract in order to supply Mills, only about 24,000 are utilized for actual sugarcane production, even

allowing for land surveying, the discrepancy cannot be explained by non-lease renewal. It is the inability for farmers to earn sustainable livelihood and I think this is one of the main reasons why we need to be relooking at the industry.

Low productivity, in some cases, abandonment of sugarcane funds was being driven by the low income that the farmer's gained. Evidence suggests that the main reason for declining productivity is the lack of financial viability without any Government support. I would like to thank the honourable members for their contribution, and I do support the motion before Parliament.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

REVIEW REPORT – PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI 2018–2019 ANNUAL REPORT

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE. - Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move that Parliament debates the Review of the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji Annual Report 2018–2019 which was tabled on 17th April, 2024.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU. - Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE. - Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, as the Member moving the motion, I rise to make a short contribution on the Review Report of the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji Annual Report 2018–2019.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Committee Report was tabled in July of last year and I wish to proceed directly in reiterating some of the main areas of discussion that are captured in this Report.

To being with, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were a few issues identified which the Committee noted and those are:

1. The high staff turnover in comparison to 2018, 2019 – todate.
2. Low budget allocation for the reported year in which in turn constraints parliamentary work.
3. Lack of awareness of the powers and authority of Parliament and its Committees by civil servants.
4. Lack of full digitization of its Standing Committees.
5. Significant number of bills stated for the reported year that stands at 88.5 percent and as a comparative, 99 percent for the year 2023 that were enacted under the Standing Order 51.
6. The Committee notes that Parliament has considered the inclusive participation of communities at all levels through the medium of broadcasting and further notes the lack of information supplied with respect to the gender composition within the two Divisions.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the lack of information on gender hinders the ability of the Standing Committee to scrutinize the report from a gender perspective as required by the Standing Orders of Parliament under Section 110(2). However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, most of these issues were addressed and clarified by the Department and any information on this can be attained or retrieved in the Committee's report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will now go straight into the recommendations put forth by the Committee for the consideration of this august Parliament and these are as follows:

1. The Committee recommends the timely submission of Annual Reports.
2. The Committee recommends that a Job Evaluation Exercise (JEE) be conducted for the Department given that the last JEE was conducted in the reported year.
3. The Committee further recommends the upgrading of IT systems and full digitization of Committee sittings.
4. The Committee further recommends that the Standing Orders be amended to review the use of Standing Order 51 by referring it to a specific sub-committee.
5. The Committee recommends that the Department ensure that there is formal SDG compliant component in all future reports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Department in tabling a substantive response to the Committee's review report as set out in Section 121(6) of the Standing Orders of Parliament.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for the opportunity to present this Report and I ask the honourable Members to take note of this Report.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. For the information of honourable Members, I have a list here of speakers and they will be speaking in the following order:

1. Hon. K.K. Lal;
2. Hon. Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs;
3. Hon. M.D. Bultavu;
4. Hon. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in support of the report and to provide my contribution. I commend the Committee, this Report was tabled in April, and we can see that we now have fully fledged report here for debate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the immediate attention and collective action that we need to focus on is the consistency of staff turnovers. The report highlights the pertinent issue of staff turnover from 2018, 2019 to present. High turnover rates are 6.01:40 to the efficiency and continuity of Parliamentary operations. They lead to loss of institutional knowledge, decreased productivity and increased training costs. Sustainability in staffing is crucial for maintaining the effective functioning of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other area I would like speak on is the lack of awareness or the powers and authority of Parliament and its Committees by civil servant. Not only civil servants but I think we need to focus on creating more awareness for our younger generation. We look forward to the Women's Parliament and in previous sessions, I recommended to Parliament that we try and get a Youth Parliament as well. The younger generation are keen to be part of how the democratic or legislature process of the country is currently being handled.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we talk about Parliament, we talk about freedom of speech, freedom of MPs doing our work. Recently there was a case where honourable Member Rinesh made some opinions on social media and he was bullied by one of the Ministers. The young people are talking

about this, Sir, how much freedom do they have to provide an opinion with respect to Parliament. We are talking about Parliament report, we should have the freedom that citizens of Fiji should be given the right to give their opinion and not be bullied.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now see that Parliament is fully digitalized. I understand there was a extensive amount of funding allocated which was \$4.6 million (I do not know the exact details where this funding was allocated) but we are still facing some technical issues and I hope our very talented IT officers can get down to the issues and solve that.

Last think I want to speak on, the most important one which we have been debating all these while when Bills come with Standing Order 51. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Report highlights the significant number of Bills enacted under Standing Order 51 with a notable increase from 88.5 percent in the reported year to 99 percent in 2023. While this indicates a high legislative activity, it also raises the concerns about thoroughness of the legislative process. The expedited procedures of Standing Order 51 should not be compromised, the quality of scrutiny and debate is carried out.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, previous Oppositions were all about going to the consultation process, but now when they are in Government, some of them are in Government...

MR. SPEAKER.- Were you there, honourable Member?

HON. K.K. LAL.- I was not part of the previous Opposition but I did research and went on and checked some of the *Hansard Reports*. Some of these honourable Members were talking about consultation but now they are doing the opposite when they are in Government. The people of Fiji are watching, they will hold us accountable for the words and the for the sentences we use in Parliament. With those words I have nothing more to add but all I have to say is we need a Youth Parliament.

There are young people who are out there who see some of us speaking, some of us engaging, debating and they want to become future parliamentarians as well but they need this learning ground which is the Youth Parliament. I request the Government to increase the budget for Parliament (maybe the honourable Minister for Finance if he is listening to me) please increase the budget for Parliament and also if you can engage some money for the Youth Parliament.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute and support the motion that is currently being debated in this august Parliament. I first of all would like to pay my respect to a member of the staff that we lost earlier in the month. He has been a very loyal servant of the People in Parliament of Fiji, may his soul rest in peace.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it has been described that it is the People's House, Parliament is the people's House, the highest Court of the land. This august Parliament is the third arm of Government, it carries a constitutional responsibility to make laws, and to hold accountable the Executive and the Judiciary in a balancing act required by and for the separation of powers.

As I reported in the morning, Sir, my delegation and I had visited the Speaker of the House of Commons last week. It was a very happy visit and as I stated this morning that Mr. Hoyle, Speaker of the House of Commons was only too willing to render his assistance to strengthen this Parliament. I hope that in the not too distant future you will have a delegation going out to visit the House of Commons, particularly to visit Malborough House again. The root of the constitutional changes that had happened to Fiji.

Returning to the Report before Parliament, Sir, I want to firstly commend the Standing Committee for their Report. For latter half of the period under review, I was the Leader of the loyal Opposition in this august Parliament.

Allow me, Sir, to acknowledge you as the honourable Speaker, the Secretary-General to Parliament and all the staff of the Legislature for the long hours of dedicated service rendered to the nation. I am aware few staff have also passed on since Parliament was re-established in 2014 after its last sitting in 2006 and I recognise the often-difficult environment the Secretariat operated in. I must also commend, Sir, the new Standing Orders issued in July 2023 which is now serving Parliament very well. I now turn to the Report and recommendations made therein.

At the outset, Mr. Speaker, Sir, please allow me to express my concern at the length of time taken to review this Report, it has been eight months. This seems unusually long when no public consultation were held by the Committee or is perhaps due to the delay in responses to queries made by the Committee. I also note that the Report ruled the limited number of Committee sitting days. Perhaps in future, Sir, all reports being reviewed by the Standing Committees of Parliament should be open for public comments. In this way, we parliamentarians and all agencies funded from the appropriations approved by Parliament, should know the views of the people on how their taxes have been used.

All annual reports are now in digital format, so they may be simply emailed out to citizens and organisations who, perhaps, sign up to be on the Parliament email distribution list, and they can make oral or written submissions to the Standing Committees.

Recommendation 1

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the recommendation for the timely submission of the Annual Reports. This is a legal requirement breached by the consistent delay across the whole of Government in submitting Annual Reports.

The Financial Management Act requires Annual Reports to be tabled to Parliament promptly and the failure to comply was evident when I was the Leader of the Opposition where we debating reports from 2007 and some Ministries and agencies had not submitted Annual Reports since 2013. Perhaps, it was due to no sittings between 2006 and 2014.

This is a sad state of affairs and continues today, and I continue to urge Ministers to ensure their Ministries and any Commissions and statutory bodies under their portfolio must report promptly to Parliament as required by the Financial Management Act 2004.

Recommendation 2

For another job evaluation exercise, as there continues to be a high turnover in the Parliament Secretariat. Perhaps, it is time to consider bonding or having a retention package so that we can get a return of investments made by Government in their development and training.

For those who proceed on study leave with pay, that the Secretary-General considers bonding them for a certain period of time after they come back and those who undertake trainings, conferences and workshops whether in Fiji or overseas, to be similarly bonded or encouraged to stay on.

While we do not want to stunt career progression of civil servants, Government must take steps to safeguard the investments made by taxpayers in civil servants to, at least, benefit on the knowledge and development gained for some time before they are released. Other people are

harvesting our human resource development programme, Sir.

As Prime Minister and Minister for the Public Service and Parliament, I find it commendable that international agencies, regional agencies, NGOs and Embassies find our civil servants to be exceptional additions to their workforce. However, as Head of Government and Minister responsible for the Civil Service, this is a consideration to be made across the Service.

Recommendation 3

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this has been implemented with the upgrade of the IT system and digitisation of Committee sittings.

Recommendation 4

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the review of the Standing Orders, in particular, the use of Standing Order 51, the review has already been carried out last year. I feel, Sir, that I must discuss Standing Order 51 in some detail, given the protests from the loyal Opposition to its use in the Bills tabled yesterday.

As you are aware, as a former Cabinet Minister yourself, Standing Order 51 has always existed in the Standing Orders in some format. This is to allow Government of the day to fast-track urgent legislations, where consultation is not possible, in an emergency or where extensive consultations have already been carried out.

I believe, Sir, that the extensive use of Standing Order 51 - the initial part of the revival of our legislation, we were probably coming out of a period when there was no legislation carried out in Parliament. Bills were coming out of a period of legislating by Decree.

I remember that very well, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 1987, I ruled by Decree from September to December of that year. I passed 25 Decrees. My first one was saying that we are now Republic and then my last one – Decree No. 25, I said that I am no longer the Leader of this Republic. I handed over leadership to His Excellency the President and asked him to get a new Constitution, get a new Prime Minister and get us moving forward.

So, when we were going through that period, when we had to use Standing Order 51, it was perhaps, that we were just coming out of the era when we ruled by Decree.

Recommendation 5

These are pretty much in order, and I support them. On Recommendation 5, I propose that this requirement apply to the Annual Reports from the Ministries, Departments, Commissions, Statutory Bodies and Public Enterprises.

I hope, Sir, that my comments will be taken as constructive and in the interest of the nation. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for allowing me to contribute to this debate and I commend the motion to Parliament. May we continue to work collaboratively for the betterment of Fiji, and I support the motion, Sir.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to give a short contribution to the motion that is before Parliament and that is the Review Report for Parliament for 2018 to 2019.

Most of the issues that are covered in the key findings of our Report has been covered by previous speakers - the honourable Prime Minister and also honourable Ketan Lal and some will be covered by the honourable Minister of Finance. But I hope it is not boring, given that all those participating in this particular debate are from Vanua Levu and this is the Parliament of Fiji and you being the Speaker, Sir. I hope it will not be biased.

Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we thank the Secretary-General and your Office, Sir, for responding to our recommendations. We have received it, it has come in a very timely manner and also at a time when we are debating it at the moment.

Also, the response from Fiji Parliament in terms of the Job Evaluation Exercise (JEE), as also recommended, I think the Parliament has assured the Committee that there will be a comprehensive assessment to the current roles and also some structural changes in the organisation's structural reform that will be taken. It will ensure the improvements in the organisation and also ensure that a Job Evaluation is conducted with its greatest possible level accuracy and efficacy.

The assurance in terms of recommendation for IT upgrade in the Chamber and also in the Committee rooms will also be prioritised. I thank Parliament for responding to the Committee in a very timely manner.

Also, the assurance from the honourable Prime Minister that this will follow suit for the other Ministries as well when Parliament makes recommendations that the Standing Orders are complied with in terms of the 14 days and 21 days for the responses to come back because it helps the Committee in making improvements in other future reports that it will deliberate on.

On the issue of Standing Order 51, I think a lot has been said by the honourable Prime Minister. We all will agree that any Government of the day will always use Standing Order 51 to fast-track Bills. It was used before and used again now, but there is always argument from the Opposition to suggest that it has been overused.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the statistics that were there, what we found in our deliberations as a Committee, given the higher number of Bills that were coming under Standing Order 51 and also the role of the Standing Orders Committee to deliberate on Bills, when suggested an amendment to the Standing Orders, I think this is not appropriate forum to discuss it but there is a Standing Orders Committee that is there under the Standing Orders in which you, Mr. Speaker, is the Chairperson, probably the Committee was suggesting a discretion to be with you, Sir, in terms of approving a particular Bill, whether it should go through Standing Order 51 rather than going to Committee of the Whole, given the high statistics we have seen in the Committee while we deliberating.

Again, as we move forward, probably more Bills will be coming. I have seen some Bills coming this week, and looking forward to other Bills that will be referred to the Committee this week and yet to be tabled.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what the Committee has seen is the allocation of more funding to Parliament. That is quite urgent - increasing the Committee work and also more staff could be recruited in which it will need more funding. I hope the honourable Minister of Finance who will speak after me, will also assure us, given that we are yet to come to the Budget, that probably the request from the Standing Committee can be taken on board.

From what the Committee has found in a few cases that when Parliament makes its submission to the Ministry of Finance or the Ministry of Economy before, most of the time the full submission is not taken on board. So, I hope that we show special preference to our Parliament and

also that it is prioritised because it is the house of the people.

Those are some of the things that the Committee has noted and I have also been assured by the honourable Prime Minister that in terms of civil servants and the authority of Parliament, that that is something that we all need to take part in, especially Government Ministers, in encouraging their civil servants or Permanent Secretaries and Deputy Secretaries, that they need to appear before the Standing Committees when communication comes to them, given that certain powers that are with Standing Committees are equivalent to the powers of the High Court.

Standing Committees can also summon people and also compel documents, but we do not want to exercise those powers. We want to build that relationship with civil servants so that they do not fear the Parliamentary Standing Committee for any submission. But, again, there needs to be some awareness in this particular area on the Powers of Parliament and also on how civil servants can work with Members of Parliament, especially on the information and they are the ones who will be implementing the policies. At the end of the day, it comes in the form of annual report and that will be deliberated by the Standing Committee.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank the honourable Prime Minister and honourable Members who have spoken before me. Let me begin by saying that I feel this Parliament is now a much happier place to come to and I feel that as a group of legislators, we are now doing our work without fear and uncertainty. I feel very good about it - good about the environment, good about the feeling of bipartisanship, despite at times some bitter and acrimonious debates. For that Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank you for your wise counsel, guidance and reliable leadership.

In addition to that, I also want to say that the honourable Prime Minister himself, within the Government and within this side of the Parliament, has always provided a leadership direction that brings about bipartisanship that feels that you like to come to Parliament.

I can say this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the eight years that I was in Opposition, sometimes I actually did not feel like coming to Parliament. I am very happy that, that is a past, and we are moving forward as a real democratic Parliament.

In the 2023-2024 Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Parliament was allocated \$16.2 million, compared to \$8.6 million for the 2022-2023 financial year. No doubt the increase in the allocation by over \$7.6 million has been prudently utilised by Parliament.

The other very important point that I want to make, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in relation to the budget and under your guidance and leadership, that too has come to fruition. In fact, Sir, you would recall that after 2014 Elections, in 2015, the formula for funding political parties, funding Members of Parliament for the duties that they undertake as legislators was unilaterally chained, and particularly the Opposition suffered in a big way. I am happy that under your leadership and under our Government, we have ensured that the political parties, their officers and also the budget allocation for the Members in terms of the allowances is adequate for them to undertake their duties.

The increase in this year's budget as you would know that it has allowed Parliament to increase its awareness programmes including the Standing Committee meetings, the preparation of the 2024 – 2025 Budget.

We want to ensure that the IT systems and the full digitization of the Committee meetings are also undertaken. We know that the Fiji Parliament is mainstreaming gender issues in its legislative processes and oversight functions including in its corporate policy.

I know that Fiji Parliament has also plans to translate *Hansard* into vernacular – *Vosa vaka Viti* and *Hindi* and translation into braille will also be an enormous undertaking by the Fijian Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am very pleased to say that under your leadership, the Parliament has engaged translators to provide translation from vernacular to English during Parliament sittings. This is very well appreciated and accepted by everyone in the country that after a long time, we have the ability or environment to actually use our vernacular language to make our points as we see sometimes being done.

A sum of \$4.4. million was allocated in the 2023–2024 Budget, in supporting Parliament’s community strategy with the purchase of multi-language captioning system that will enable Parliament to be a more inclusive and increase citizen engagement in the three languages that will be televised and livestreamed on the internet. I know that the digitization of the is still in progress. I am sure that this will be completed in a very short period of time, perhaps in the next few months.

I just wanted to also say that between 2018 and 2023-2024, a total of \$61,526,389 has been allocated to Parliament; the highest being in the current budget of \$16.2 million.

The Financial Management Act under section 37(a) of 2004, all independent officers including the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji is expected to be adequately resourced and independently provided resources so that the Legislature can do its work without any hinderance from anywhere. We are very pleased that the budget that was allocated in the 2023-2024 Budget has allowed the Parliament, as an independent body, to achieve those objectives which support the practice of democracy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to say this to my Opposition colleagues and to all those who have a view about Government, we may not agree on the performance of the Government, on how the Government has done in the last 17 to 18 months, but one thing Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all can agree that we now have an air of freedom, we now have a practice of democracy

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

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... we have a Parliament where legislators can feel free and can talk to each other; this is the feedback. I have to be very honest to say this. When we go around, when you talk to the business community, they actually take the queue from Parliament, they look at your leadership and many people have come to me, not just people in Fiji, internationally, our development partners and they highly appreciate the fact that under your leadership, under the leadership of the Prime Minister and this Government.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- There is now a practice of democracy and all the indicators, the recent Freedom House Index, puts us up there. The removal of the draconian Media Decree, all these, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has allowed Parliament to be the beacon of democracy.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Parliament, Mr. Speaker, Sir, under your leadership is a temple of democracy and that is the biggest change that we have seen in the last 18 months.

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

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Stop lying.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I want to warmly congratulate you, Sir, on your leadership and thank the Secretary-General to Parliament, all the staff of Parliament for taking on a new day and a new practice of Parliament in this country and a new practice of democracy. Long live democracy in this country.

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this time to thank the honourable Members for their input with regards to the motion before Parliament. I also join them, thanking your good self, Sir and your Office, the Office of the Secretary-General and all the staff in Parliament for facilitating whatever it is for honourable Members and also the Members of the Committee.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Koya we still keep our fingers cross on the budget.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of our sitting today. I thank you so much for all your contributions, patience and understanding as well in trying to get through whatever we have had in our Order of the Day. I thank you all for that and Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow morning at 9.30.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.33 p.m.