

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

WEDNESDAY, 22ND MAY, 2024

[CORRECTED COPY]

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WEDNESDAY, 22ND MAY, 2024

The Parliament met at 9.46 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Aliki Bia.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Tuesday, 21st 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. I know it has been a tough and a hectic week for the past few days, especially on all those who are joining us in the gallery, and those watching proceedings on television and the internet. Thank you for your continued interest in the workings of your Parliament.

Year 8 Students – Marist Brothers Primary School

Honourable Members, this morning, we are joined by the Teachers and Year 8 Students of Marist Brothers Primary School. There is a steady influx of children coming in to sit and witness for themselves what is going on in this Parliament.

This is your Parliament, children, and we are here representing you, we are here to make laws, change laws, amend laws, even repealing the laws. We wish you well in your visit today and hopefully, someday, some of you might be joining us here in becoming Members of Parliament as well.

Australian High Commission Officials

Honourable Members, we are also joined by Ms. Rebecca Brown and Mr. Bharat Mohan, both from the Australian High Commission. Thank you for joining us this morning.

Indo-Pacific Economic Framework - Gazette

Honourable Members, please, kindly take note that pursuant to Standing Order 130(5), I have provided notification in the Gazette that the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework has been approved

by Parliament. So, that will see to the quick gazetting of that Framework. So, Government's work in seeing that it is being taken to their next round of meeting in Singapore, this has been held with it as well in Parliament.

Standing Orders Committee Meeting

Also, honourable Members, I wish to remind Members of the Standing Orders Committee that we are having our meeting at the Small Committee Room when Parliament suspends proceedings for lunch. I hope you have read copies that have been circulated to you.

Emoluments Committee Report

Honourable Members, indeed, for your information, I can confirm that I have received notification from the Chairperson of the Emoluments Committee that she will table the Committee's Report in today's sitting. This business will be dealt with under Item 4 in today's Order Paper.

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

Consolidated Review Report – Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources 2018 to 2021 Annual Reports

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources, I hereby present the Standing Committee's Consolidated Review Report on the Annual Report of the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources for the years 2018 to 2021.

The Committee has undertaken its scrutiny on the Ministry's Annual Reports for the said period under review and noted the overall performance of the Ministry through the hard work of the staff. The Committee noted that the Annual Reports clearly defined the roles of the two Departments within the Ministry.

Whilst the Committee noted the delay in the submission of the said Annual Reports, the Committee appreciated the initiatives undertaken by the Ministry to address the delays in submitting Annual Reports. The Annual Reports clearly articulated the Ministry's role, annual targets, strategic priorities, achievements, responsibilities, challenges faced and way forward.

The Committee noted that the Ministry is involved in a lot of technical areas of operation, pertaining to Mineral Resources, Land Use, GIS Survey, Geological Survey, Valuation, Ground Water Exploration, Drilling, Mining, et cetera. The Ministry has had to deal with the constraints, such as lack of resources in all the specialised areas.

The Committee has proposed a few recommendations to the Ministry for the purposes of improving its services.

I wish to extend my appreciation to the Executive and staff of the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources for their hard work and dedication.

At this juncture, I take this opportunity to thank the honourable Members who were involved in the production of this bipartisan Report, namely, honourable Jone Usamate as Deputy Chairperson, honourable Ratu Isikeli Tuiwailevu, honourable Iliesa Vanawalu and honourable Joseph Nand as an Alternate Member.

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

(Report handed to Secretary-General)

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move a motion without notice:

That a debate on the content of the Report is initiated at a future sitting.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Review Report on the Parliamentary Retirement Allowances Act 1989 and
Parliamentary Remunerations Act 2014

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Special Committee on Emoluments was formed by a resolution of Parliament on Wednesday 12th July, 2023. However, due to the non-inclusion of other Offices, such as the Office of the President and Office of the Speaker, and the review of the Parliamentary Retirement Allowances Act 1989, an amended motion was later moved to rectify the anomalies that were previously not included.

In that respect, a new motion for the review of all the Offices mentioned above, was moved by the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament, seconded and debated, and was passed as a Resolution of Parliament on Monday, 11th September, 2023. The Committee was required to:

- (a) review the salaries, allowances and benefits of the Members of Parliament, the President and Speaker, as provided for under the Parliamentary Remunerations Act 2014;
- (b) review the Parliamentary Retirement Allowances Act 1989; and
- (c) must report back to Parliament at a later sitting.

The Committee initiated its first meeting on 24th July 2023, and collectively agreed to call for submissions from all the respective Political Parties represented in Parliament. The Committee subsequently received submissions from SODELPA, the FijiFirst Party, the National Federation Party and the People's Alliance Party.

After receiving submissions from respective Parties, the Committee felt that it was appropriate to engage an independent consultant to review the salaries, allowances and benefits of the Members of Parliament, the President and the Speaker, and then submit a report back to the Committee. To this end, an advertisement for an independent consultant was published in the dailies but, unfortunately, there were no applicants.

Therefore, through the support of the Parliamentary Support Project, the Committee reached out to the UNDP with the same mandate, to put a call out for an independent consultant to undertake this work. Through that process, we were able to identify an independent consultant, who had actually carried out work before for the same Parliament.

The Committee unanimously reached a general consensus of all the proposed recommendations from the independent consultant and the amendments to the Act which are outlined in the matrix enclosed in the Report to be tabled today. So, I am proud to say, Mr. Speaker, that this is truly a bipartisan Report.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to all the honourable Members of the Committee, namely, honourable Ro Filipe Tuisawau, honourable Aseri Radrodro, honourable Alvick Maharaj and honourable Mosese Bulitavu, for their hard work and dedication in the many meetings that we have had, and also the work of our independent consultant through UNDP.

On behalf of the Committee, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hereby commend this Report to Parliament.

(Report handed to Secretary-General)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Wednesday, 12th of July, 2023 and Monday, 11th of September, 2023, I hereby move a motion without notice:

That a debate on the contents and the adoption of this Report is to be initiated at a future sitting.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

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

1. Honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs;
2. Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications;
3. Honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forests;
4. Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation; and
5. Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics.

Honourable Members, Ministers may speak up to 20 minutes and after the Minister, I will then invite the Leader of the Opposition or his designate, to speak on the Statement for no more than five minutes. There will be no other debate.

I now call on the Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs to deliver his Statement.

Vanua Levu Road Upgrade Project

MR. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a very good morning to you. The honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of this august Parliament; *ni bula vinaka*.

A very good morning to the students who are visiting us, those who have been acknowledged this morning and also those who have not been acknowledged, and to everyone tuning in into the live

broadcast of today's Parliamentary Sitting; *ni sa bula vina'a*, namaste and good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver my Ministerial Statement on the Vanua Levu Road Upgrade Project. The Project is to be funded by a grant from the People's Republic of China through the China International Development Co-operation Agency (CIDCA). It is anticipated that the road upgrade will stimulate development of tourism, renewable energy projects, including hydro power facilities and the transport and movement of people, including through the planned Nabouwalu township which is the main transport link to Vitilevu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the "One China Policy" has been the firm foundation of the Fiji-China diplomatic relations, founded some 49 years ago. As you are aware, Sir, I met President Xi Jinping on the margins of the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) held in San Francisco in November last year. The key deliberations during our meeting centered around China's global development initiatives, with a specific focus on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the BRI is designed to foster economic connectivity, trade, and cultural exchange, particularly through infrastructure development. This also resonates with our national development objectives. The BRI aligns with Fiji's agenda, emphasizing shared goals of policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, trade facilitation and financial integration.

Since the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on the BRI in 2018, bilateral and economic co-operation and people-to-people exchanges have yielded fruitful results. Fiji will continue to promote the cooperation with China under the framework of the BRI in areas such as infrastructure construction, renewable energy, agriculture and fisheries.

In talks with President Xi, I emphasised Fiji and China's strong historical ties, underpinned by shared aspirations and common interests, fostering a comprehensive strategic partnership rooted in mutual trust and respect.

The multifaceted collaboration between Fiji and China spans people-to-people relations and cooperation across sectors such as agriculture, education, health, trade and investment, poverty reduction, infrastructure and climate change.

President Xi and I also discussed practical matters, including Fiji's concessional loan with China, as well as the Vanualevu Road Upgrading Project.

As Minister responsible for Climate Change, I expressed our interest in collaborating with China on recycling initiatives, recognising the potential for economic incentives derived from China's experience in industrial recycling processes.

At this juncture, Sir, I wish to cordially thank the Ambassador Zhou Jian for our continuing discussions on the prospects for future cooperation in the areas of socio-economic development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the China Aid Project will improve the following roads in Vanualevu:

1. Part of the Nabouwalu-Makolei Road in Bua;
2. Natewa-West Coast in Cakaudrove (unfortunately, it does not go to my village); and
3. Nabalebale-Naviavia/Dawara Roads in Cakaudrove.

The project is estimated to cost FJ\$300 million and will be the flagship project under China's Belt and Road Initiative in Fiji.

Vanualevu has an area of 5,581.1 square kilometres or 2,157.2 square miles, and a population of 135,965, as confirmed by the 2019-2020 National Household Income and Expenditure Survey Report.

The roads being upgraded are currently still unpaved gravel that connect rural village roads and need to be paved. Such road conditions increase travelling time, damage transported commodities and goods, are insufficient for current traffic loads, and restrict socio-economic development in general.

Tabulated below are villages, schools and health facilities that will benefit from the 82 kilometre road upgrade.

Road	No. of villages	No. of schools/tertiary	No. of Health Facilities	No. of Government Facilities
Nabouwalu/ Nasolo (15 km)	15	8	3	6
Natewa West Coast (32 km)	22	8	4	6
Wailevu West (35 km)	61	18	5	3
Total	98	34	12	15

The project will fulfill our objectives to promote economic growth, foster fair distribution of development gains to the population and improving social conditions, particularly in the rural areas.

As you know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, remote rural and island communities in Fiji are relatively poor and isolated from economic opportunities and social services, particularly when rural access roads and jetties are in poor condition. Further, our country is prone to disruptive natural events, such as tropical cyclones and resultant flooding.

Fiji's topography has restricted the 11,000 kilometre road network to spine or circumferential main roads with feeder roads, leaving few route alternatives. In the main urban areas, lower-level municipal roads are neglected, rough, and sometimes impassable. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, transport infrastructure and services are key to promoting economic growth and social development. Further, rural industries such as sugarcane farming, forestry and tourism rely on road access, for example, from plantations to processing plants and to our ports.

This project will also facilitate better access to health facilities for those in districts of Vatuova, Koroalau, Wailevu, Solevu, Vuya and Nabouwalu, with a population of approximately 10,000. The upgrading and sealing of these rural roads will also enable better access to banks and financial institutions to boost the culture of savings, as well as to micro and small businesses. Further, the provision of good quality roads will ensure better transportation and linkages of quality farm produce to markets, middlemen, traders and processing plants for export purposes.

Rural communities residing along the roads being upgraded will also have better access to Government services and offices. In fact, there are 12 Health Facilities and 15 Government Stations along these three roads currently.

The current poor road conditions greatly affect operations for rural service providers. Poor road quality hinders access, and it is costly for those residing in the districts of Nadi, Solevu and

Vuya. The project will complete a major link in the strategic network and provide a faster route for traffic around the island of Vanua Levu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of the project, a feasibility study was carried out earlier this year by a technical team from China. The team conducted a thorough investigation on road traffic and conditions. Ambassador Zhou Zian and I visited the team during the Study to discuss their preliminary findings, and I was pleased to host the team at Drekeniwai (my village) for afternoon tea.

The Feasibility Report is now being finalised and will be studied by the China International Development Cooperation (CIDCA) before work commences. This project prioritizes areas requiring upgrading, such as this portion of Vanua Levu, previously overlooked. The project seamlessly continues the Fiji Roads Upgrading Programme (FRUP), which commenced soon after Independence by the Alliance Government.

The FRUP was continued by the SVT Coalition Government in the 1990s and SDL Government in early 2006. This project connects the previous iterations of FRUP. In the past, the chiefs and leaders of Cakaudrove politely deferred road development to areas facing greater challenges in other parts of Fiji, "*Me ra liu mada o ira qore, Tu'aqu, 'tou qai muri o 'edatou*". However, it is now time to address neglect and ensure we also improve road conditions.

Previously, the Fiji Road Upgrading Projects (FRUP1, FRUP2, FRUP3) saw upgrades of the national highways on Viti Levu. These upgrades were based on the identified need and demand for transport and economic activities to be supported to benefit the large populations in those areas. This is also the case with this Vanua Levu Road Upgrading Projects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, future road upgrading plans will see round the island roads completed on the larger islands as infrastructure development projects flow to the remaining large islands and maritime provinces. The project is expected to commence in 2025. It is anticipated to be completed within 24 months to 36 months after completion of necessary technical work. Sir, I would like to express the Government's appreciation to the people and the Government of China for their continued assistance and support.

I thank you, Sir, for the opportunity to deliver this Ministerial Statement on the Vanua Levu Roads Project. I thank the Government of China who are willing to come on board since we were isolated after the events of 1987, 2000 and 2006. They decided to stay with us, and we changed our policies. We introduced the Look North Policy, and they have been there since, when others are saying that the new Chinese influence has come into the region when they are only filling a vacuum left when our traditional partners at that time turned away from us. *Vina 'a vaalevu, dhanyavaad and shukriya.*

MR. SPEAKER.- I think I will be very diplomatic in refraining myself from making any comments. Maybe, the honourable Leader of the Opposition will be providing us with the necessary response.

(Laughter)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thought for a moment there that the honourable Deputy Prime Minister was going to reply.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, first of all, I would like to thank the honourable Prime Minister for his Ministerial Statement today, talking about the planned developments on Vanua Levu. I think everyone in Vanua Levu looks forward to it, and it is a progressive development of all the things that had been done in the past, as pointed out under FRUP.

Also, during the time that we were in office, we took the Look North Policy a step further forward. We developed the Northern Development Programme, and we saw some major developments such as the paving of the road from Nabouwalu up to Dreketi, the road to Bagasau and all developments in Vanua Levu.

There continued to be a lot of challenges in Vanua Levu. When we came in, we found out that it was the second largest island in Fiji but still had a lot of major infrastructure challenges. During that time, there was quite a lot of development that was undertaken, and I am glad to see that this is now moving forward.

I would also like to express our appreciation to the People's Republic of China for their assistance to us, as their Prime Minister has been a good friend to Fiji through thick and thin. When others were not beside us, they were there to help us along during the years.

We have also been seeing part of this Belt and Road Initiative. We are glad to see that this road is going to have an impact on road upgrades in various parts of Vanua Levu. A lot of us in Parliament have links to the Natewa-West Coast Road, villages along the coast of Saqani and all those areas are all looking forward to that assistance. There are a lot of industrial activities and agriculture take place in this area.

Also, on the road from Naibalebale to Naviavia, down to Dawara, and also from Nabouwalu to Makolei. These are places where there are very good agricultural sites. A lot of work have been done there. With the port up in Nabouwalu, the passage of this road will allow production to increase and people to have good access to markets. As the honourable Prime Minister has pointed out, this will also allow access to schools and health facilities for the people who live along those roads. Sir, I congratulate this particular aspect.

However, there are still some concerns. I think the Government needs to take note of some of the major issues that we need on roads in Vanua Levu. One, of course, is the major road that we have from Nayarabale to Vanuavou. This is a major access where people can cut across from the bay, moving quickly across to Labasa. This is a road that, once done, will open up a lot of economic opportunities for people in that particular area. There is a road also from Sevaci to Korotasere, that is the road that needs to be upgraded.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one very important one that cuts across from the South end of Vanua Levu that links up to Labasa is the Daria Road. That particular road still has splash crossings, and a lot of people travel on this road and move cargo to get to Labasa faster. I think that is a very important one that we need to address.

Also, the road towards the other side of Vanua Levu, the Tukavesi/Napuka, Sir, that road will also require a lot of other repairs. There are a few other roads in Vanua Levu that I would like to mention for the Government to consider:

1. There has been a pilot cut in the *Tikina o Navakasiga* to the village of Naivaka. It is still a pilot cut. I would urge Government to see how that pilot cut can be completed so that that road is actually completed.

2. There is also a road that was mentioned by FRA, the road from Nasasa in Nadogo going up to Valevoni Village which is in Saqani. That is a road too that I am hoping that the people will be able to do it.
3. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the completion of the extension of the road from Naqolotu to linkup to Nabukelevu to complete the loop around the South end of Kadavu. I think that one will come in very handy for the people in that area, especially for honourable Koroilavesau.
4. A lot of needs for roaders in the upper reach of Naitisiri.
5. The last one that I am mentioning is the Hibiscus Highway. I was there two weeks ago. I have never seen it in the state that it is in now. I know that there is a planned project that exists, but I have never ever seen it in this state. I hope that that road will need to be ripped and remade because of the huge potholes. So, I am hopeful that the Government and the Minister responsible is aware of it. I know that there is a project plan in place but I just wanted to raise this because that is very critical for our tourism in that area.

Once again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank the honourable Prime Minister for his Ministerial Statement this morning.

MR. SPEAKER.- At this juncture, I would also like to acknowledge the presence of a very senior partner of a big contractor in road making up in the North, Mr. Wise, who is sitting in the gallery and is in red shirt. He is a partner of RPA - a major contractor up there in the North. Welcome, Mr. Wise. Also, for those who I have not mentioned, we welcome you to today's sitting.

Well, we have heard from the Opposition the roads – he has jumped from Vanua Levu to Kadavu, and that is what we are here for. We have to highlight all these to bring the attention of the Government of the day to the plight that the people are encountering.

ICT Development - Starlink Satellite Technology

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you and apologies for the premature rise, but I suppose I am probably as good as any authority on Vanua Levu being a *vasu* from Vanua Levu that I am, I did not stop the new development. The Opposition was wanting to stand up as well.

(Laughter)

But, leaving that aside, on behalf of this august Parliament, let me welcome the students from Marist Brothers Primary School. It was a rival school to my school, which is Suva Methodist Primary School. We welcome you here today and hope you will learn something from your Parliament. In Parliament, sometimes we are a bit loud but trust me, it is done in the spirit of trying to serve our country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand before you today to provide an update in terms of the efforts being undertaken regarding ICT development by the 'do nothing' Government, Sir, including the recent announcement of Starlink officially commencing its services in Fiji. This marks a significant milestone for our nation, as the highly anticipated introduction of Starlink Satellite Technology is, indeed, a game changer, particularly in further empowering remote, maritime and underserved communities.

This also demonstrates the increased confidence of global companies in Fiji and in the region, as evidenced by Google's extension of subsea cable connections to Fiji and the region. These strategic engagements and developments tangibly contribute to the Coalition Government's goal of diversifying the economy of Fiji, rebuilding the economic architecture of Fiji, progressing into a more digital economy and cementing Fiji as the hub of the Pacific. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to inform this august Parliament that we are making more progress in this regard.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, regarding Starlink and to provide some background, in November last year, Starlink was issued with a Spectrum Licence by the Ministry of Trade, Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications, and a Telecommunications Licence by the Telecommunications Authority of Fiji (TAF). Following that, Starlink was then to carry out the necessary compliance procedures and arrangements to operationalise in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the use of satellite technology is not new, as our service providers have been employing the use of satellite technology through partnerships with Oneweb, International Telecommunications Satellite Organization (Intelsat) and Kacific, to progressively connect our unconnected rural communities. But what is new is that now, our people can directly utilise the services of a satellite provider and currently, only Starlink has acquired a licence to do that in Fiji. If you like, Sir, as we say in Tailevu, it is the democratisation of communications globally.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you will also hear me throughout this Statement reference LEW, which is the acronym for a category of satellites, known as Low Earth Orbiting Satellites. This category of satellites, as the name suggests, fly closer to earth compared to other satellites (at around 200 kilometres above the earth as opposed to 1200 kilometres above the earth). Starlink and Oneweb are LEOs. The Kacific, which is also used in Fiji by our service providers, is part of another category of satellites known as Geostationary Orbit Satellites (GEOs).

The benefits of LEOs extend beyond high-speed internet. Its resilience during emergencies and capacity for rapid disaster recovery are particularly noteworthy and in the Fiji context, this is quite significant. Unlike traditional land-based infrastructure, which can be severely damaged by natural disasters, LEO satellites network remain generally unaffected. This was demonstrated firsthand when Starlink reconnected our neighbours Tonga after the 2022 Hunga volcanic eruption which severed over 200 kilometres of its vital undersea cable communications, cutting off its link to the world. The length of the severed cable link was roughly the distance between Suva and Nadi through the Queen's Highway.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to announce that as of 20th May, 2024, our people can now directly subscribe to Starlink's services via their company's website. We had anticipated that this news would come earlier, Sir, however, due to some logistical and operational challenges in preparing to operationalise, there was a delay between the approval and them starting on the ground.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the regulatory front, I understand that during this period, some individuals and businesses had purchased Starlink kits from abroad and Starlink is currently working with TAF, to ensure that all Starlink devices and services operating in Fiji are compliant with our regulations.

I see from the Starlink website that there are packages available for personal and business use already, and I am sure that this will catapult the internet in our underserved regions, providing new opportunities for education, health, business and personal communication.

I would also like to urge our local telecommunications operators to take advantage of the opportunities presented by Starlink's entry into our market. I understand that our providers have

been partnering with other satellite providers to provide this connectivity to remote and rural communities. By leveraging this technology, operators have further options to provide backhaul services to areas that were previously unreachable or prohibitively expensive to connect. This collaboration will further enhance our national connectivity and will contribute to ensure that no region is left behind in our digital transformation journey.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is also important to note that satellite internet connectivity through LEOs is not a panacea to all our challenges in providing meaningful connectivity to our people. Like everything in life, Sir, it has its advantages and disadvantages.

While satellite connectivity has a pivotal role, particularly in reaching the most remote areas and especially in disaster management, terrestrial communication technologies play an equally critical role in our national connectivity. Terrestrial communication technologies, such as fibre optic networks and cellular infrastructure, are advancing rapidly. Two of our service providers are making significant strides in this area and are continuing their 5G testing right now and providing live user trials.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in November last year, I briefed Parliament on Google's South Pacific Connect initiative in Fiji and today, I would like to share an update on the ongoing efforts. The Ministry, through our Trade Commission in San Francisco and the team at Investment Fiji, have been working closely with Google, to ensure that adequate assistance is provided as Google works to complete regulatory compliances and further their engagements in Fiji.

I had recently led a Trade Mission to North America as part of the North America Business Mission where key members of the Fiji Delegation met with representatives of the Google Network Infrastructure for a project update. Google's Vice President of Global Network Infrastructure was one of the keynote speakers at the North America Business Forum that was held in San Francisco on 8th May, 2024, and this shows the company's commitment, not only in its investment in Fiji but also being a reputable partner, showcasing Fiji's capabilities to potential investors.

Alongside this, our Director-General Digital Government Transformation, Cybersecurity and Communications was attending the Cyber and Tech Retreat and was initiating discussions with Google's Vice President, Government Affairs and Public Policy on other areas of collaboration, utilising new and emerging technologies and also artificial intelligence. These demonstrate, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a coordinated and extensive approach that we are taking. I am looking forward to many more collaborative and strategic partnerships and initiatives as a result of this.

In addition to the Honomoana and Tabua subsea cables that was recently announced, Google has also announced that it will deliver two new intra-Pacific cables, namely, the Bulikula and Halaihai, in collaboration with Amalgamated Telecom Holdings (ATH), APTelecom and Telstra, to increase digital connectivity in the Central Pacific.

The Bulikula cable will connect Guam with Fiji and potentially onward to South-East Asia, while the second cable will link Guam, French Polynesia through to Fiji and onward potentially to South America. This will form a ring between Guam, French Polynesia and Fiji, while connecting Fiji to Australia and the United States. The ring will also include pre-positioned branching units, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that will allow other Pacific Island countries to set up connections - a second connection. This will make Fiji truly the hub of the Pacific and continue this Government's desire to create benefits for all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to share the promising future that subsea internet investment has for our nation. According to a report titled, "Connecting Fiji: The opportunity for growth and

prosperity from subsea cable internet investment" by a company called Access Partnership, the new subsea cable infrastructure is set to significantly enhance our economic output through increased internet usage by reducing IP transit prices and network latency.

A more dynamic local subsea cable market is projected to lower IP transit prices by 1.4 percent annually, spurring higher internet data traffic growth by, at least, 0.9 percent each year. These advancements are estimated to boost our global GDP by US\$295 million by 2030, and create nearly 3,600 jobs, representing 1 percent of our 2019 figures. Investing in subsea internet infrastructure is a significant step towards a more prosperous and connected Fiji.

These initiatives reiterate the Coalition Government's understanding that a resilient and modern ICT infrastructure is the backbone of any digital transformation effort in Fiji. Therefore, we have earmarked various key Government services to be digitised through our ongoing Business Now Project. Phase 1 will involve digitising several "Starting a Business" services and Phase 2 involves automating the approval through Town and Country Planning. This will truly transform how the technology is being used in Government and the good news is we would not be stopping there. Through the platform that is being provided which is called Fiji Integrated Licences and Permits Approval System (FILPAS), we will be able to digitise more of the licensing processes and permits across all the Ministries quite rapidly.

Apart from this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a National Digital Strategy being developed for Fiji. In fact, next week, we are holding the validation workshop for the strategy. That is how fast, Sir, we are moving in terms of digital transformation.

We are also planning at the commencement of the Budget to fully announce our desire to connect the unconnected around the country. We have a bit of money in the Trust Accounts, and we will put that to good use, also inviting some development partners to top it up to ensure that we connect.

One of the things that is becoming obvious as well is that, with this improved ICT infrastructure or enhanced ICT infrastructure, we will need to position the education curriculum to be able to capture the benefits from this new emerging restructure of the Fijian economy. To the students of Marist Brothers, start looking for jobs in IT and technology.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the vast adoption of digital technologies by our people, we are also mindful that this will also increase the threat landscape. Therefore, we are undertaking parallel efforts to bolster our cybersecurity efforts, and I will speak more on this in my response to the motion that the honourable Attorney General will be tabling today on the adoption of the Budapest Convention. One thing is clear, Sir, these ICT developments reiterate the need for Government to accede to the Budapest Convention as it is the only international treaty that is dealing with cybercrime and electronic evidence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in closing, the entry of Starlink into Fiji's market, as well as Google's ongoing project and our digitalization efforts, marks an exciting new chapter in our efforts to expand internet access, improve connectivity and make services accessible for all. These initiatives underscore our commitment to bridging the digital divide and ensuring that all our people have the tools and opportunities to succeed in the digital age. The Coalition Government remains dedicated to supporting and fostering such advancements, and we look forward to the numerous benefits that these ICT developments will bring to our nation, and to the region.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, together, we are building a more connected, inclusive, and prosperous Fiji, and by extension, a prosperous Pacific region. Thank you for this opportunity, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, at this juncture, I intend to adjourn Parliament for tea. In so doing, I take this opportunity to invite the students of Marist Primary School and those members of the public sitting in the gallery to join our honourable Members of Parliament for morning tea at the Big Committee Room.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.43 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.29 a.m.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, since we have only five minutes, I will try and be as quick as possible, with all the information that I have.

Mr. Speaker, I take my hat off to the honourable Minister with respect to moving the ICT section forward and doing so much work, in terms of continuity also in terms of growing Fiji. As we all know, Sir, Fiji, despite our geographical challenges, we remain one of the most developed countries in terms of ICT in our region.

I took a cursory glance over a report that was done by the Department of Commerce from USA, and this is coming from the International Trade Administration. They have done a thorough examination of our system - this is for investors to have a look at and there are some very good bits of critical information that have come up. So, in that report, they have mentioned how we have benefitted from it and this is totally independent of what we may say from different sides of Parliament.

It basically spelt out how we benefitted from an extensive submarine cable networking which connects Fiji to neighbouring Pacific islands, we have operators, like Vodafone Fiji, Amalgamated Telecom Holdings (ATH), Telecom Fiji Limited, Digicel Fiji, and now we have Starlink as part of the whole ICT landscape. We still have a small issue regarding 5 percent of our country still not having mobile network coverage, but this inclusion by Starlink will benefit our rural communities. The only thing that I see, and I had a chat with the honourable Minister about this, it may be a little cost prohibitive, at the moment, for our rural communities.

In my five minutes, I want to emphasize here, and I hope the honourable Minister of Finance will support the honourable Minister for Trade in may be looking at an avenue where we can subsidise this so that our communities are able to access this particular Starlink services being provided because right now, it is very cost prohibitive, and it is in its infancy status.

Honourable Minister of Finance, on behalf of the rural people, I think we both speak the same language so, please, ensure and maybe there is some subsidy to our rural communities with respect to the service.

Our ICT platform, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has been fantastic. We have got mobile money which was introduced to us in Fiji where we can pay our bills, we can deposit, and we can also withdraw. It is actually a phenomenal platform to build on. But there are things that we must open our eyes to and be very careful about and I think the report itself actually says it.

There are recent regional studies that have been done that have said that with the increased connectivity that we have, the region faces risks, and these particular risks are cyber-attacks. When you get into this particular space, you are also getting into the illegal space where you are actually going to be very, very vulnerable. The potential for this to cause financial loss and harm is actually great, fraud in terms of unauthorized access to banking, et cetera, all of those things, and the well-being of our citizens is at stake.

Whilst we do this, whilst we open up and whilst we make this landscape modern in terms of a modern nation State and look at it like that, we must be very wary of these particular cyber-attacks that actually happen. Mobile security applications and software applications will also be increasingly in demand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it helps our business process outsourcing area and that was an area that we looked at which was going to be a phenomenal amount of business for Fiji. Also in the cyber-security operations, we could actually benefit out of all of this. As I have said, Telecom Fiji Limited is a regulator and that is something that we would need to look at, honourable Attorney-General, in terms of the regulations or laws that need to be put into this space. The modernization of these laws is a very important area but, at the same time, we must not have blinkers on, we must look at it in terms of how we can protect it and make sure that we protect our citizens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have only got 15 seconds left but I did promise the honourable Minister that I was being supportive of this. Thank you, Sir.

Logging Operations in the Maritime Islands

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; *ni sa bula vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to provide an update on the progress of our logging operation in the maritime islands, a vital project that contributes to our economy and supports our local communities, a project where Government has also re-strategised and invested heavily in since this financial year, recognising and addressing the plight of our resource owners on these islands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the total area of pine to be harvested in Muani, Kadavu, for this project amounts to 83 hectares - a significant undertaking that requires careful planning, considerable logistics and inter-agency coordination before execution. I am pleased to announce that \$600,000 was released last Friday from the Ministry of Finance to meet the barge costs for Muani.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, groundwork costs, including field verification for stocktaking as a requirement for harvesting licence and Muani Jetty scoping works came to a total of \$13,500. The barge grant of \$600,000 will cover the transportation of six barge loads, each carrying 2,000 tonnes from Muani to Lautoka Port.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to report that the logging companies, Drelaga Holdings Limited and Burning Bush Pte Limited, are currently conducting logging in Muani. The expected first load is scheduled for 1st June, 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to highlight the details of the machines that make up the logging fleet currently in Muani - a total of four John Deer Skidders, three CAT Bell Loaders, one CAT Front loader, one CAT Bulldozer and three trucks – one 12-wheeler and two 10 wheelers. In addition, four twin cabs are used as standby vehicles on site. These machines and vehicles are essential for the successful transportation, stacking and stockpiling of logs at every stage of our operation as per standard requirement of harvesting plans.

The harvesting crew consists of 30 dedicated contractors, each with their own specific roles, from machine operators to chainsaw operators, all working together to ensure the smooth operation of our harvesting project. These workers are currently camping in the village of Muani, with accommodation provided by the landowners for the comfort and convenience of the contractors.

With guidance from the Fiji Roads Authority (FRA), the port construction is anticipated to be completed on 24th May, 2024, subject to favourable weather conditions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, importantly, the landowners will be paid by Tropik Wood Industries Ltd at the rate of \$60 per tonne, resulting in an expected total payout of \$0.8 million. This financial support will not only benefit the landowners but also underlines our commitment to fostering positive relationships with our communities who are relying on Government for technical support towards investments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the same initiative has been projected for Lakeba whereby another \$250,000 has been released as an additional grant to Fiji Pine Trust from the Ministry of Finance. This will be for the construction of a port in Wainiyabia, Lakeba in consultation with the Fiji Roads Authority. The Forest Power House, a company that will be contracted to construct the Lakeba Port is expected to start before the month end. The harvesting licence is currently being progressed to ensure all requirements are complied with.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the expected return for the landowners in Lakeba will be \$960,000 for the initial licence area of 83 hectares. The total area stocked in Lakeba is about 700 hectares and licences will be progressively determined based on current levels of compliance and preparation of harvesting plans for identified viable areas suitable for harvesting. The Ministry is working closely with the Fiji Pine Trust in developing a 20-Year Forest Management Plan with harvesting schedules for all pine schemes in the maritime islands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Narocake Pine Scheme in Gau has also been assisted through Forestry's Pine Development Capital Project in processing pine posts. The Ministry has committed a total of \$25,000 and produced a volume of 79 cubic metres worth of \$59,724.75 from these sales. With these funds, the Narocake Pine Scheme also was able to purchase a three-tonne canopy truck together with the assistance from the Ministry of Trade and Co-operatives, the Scheme managed to develop the Narocake Co-operative Limited as part of our Community Development Programme for Fiji Pine Trust grant and Head 32 - Maritime Pine Development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under Head 50, Moala and Lakeba had been assisted in the Housing Rehabilitation Programme. A total of 82.5 cubic metres for Moala, which is equivalent to 15 house frames and 60.5 cubic metres for Lakeba, which is equivalent to 11 house frames were funded. The value of timber harvested and processed for Lakeba house frames is \$66,550 and \$90,750 for Moala.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are various measurable outputs and outcomes from these maritime project support and beneficiaries, including the communities, private sectors and the nation as a whole.

For the communities, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are:

1. Financial benefits: This includes the payment of \$60 per tonne to landowners, resulting in a total payout of \$0.8 million. This direct financial support will enhance the livelihoods of the local landowners and their families.
2. Employment opportunities for the communities: The project will create numerous job opportunities in logging, transportation, and pot operations, leading to increased employment in the local communities.
3. Infrastructure development: The construction and upgrading of port facilities, guided by the Fiji Roads Authority will improve local infrastructure, providing long-term benefits to the communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the private sector will also benefit through:

1. Economic activities: The release of \$647,000 to Tropik Wood Industries will stimulate the activities within the private sector through barge subsidy.
2. Business opportunities: The logistics and transportation sectors will benefit from the movement of six barge loads, each carrying 2000 tonnes of logs, creating new business opportunities and partnership.
3. Sustainable practice: By adhering to sustainable logging practice the private sector can demonstrate its commitment to environmental stewardship, corporate social responsibility, enhancing its reputation to ensuring a long-term viability.

For the nation as a whole, there will be:

1. Expected economic growth: The overall economic contribution of this logging operation, including job-creation and business opportunities will support national economic growth.
2. -
3. Sustainable Development: the project aligns with our national goals of promoting sustainable practices ensuring that our natural resources are managed responsibly for future generations.
4. Enhanced Infrastructure: the improvements in port facilities and related infrastructure will have lasting positive impacts on national logistics and capabilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the cooperation and assistance of our financial and investment partners we are confident that this long overdue harvesting of matured maritime pine project will yield positive outcomes for all stakeholders involved. Together, we can continue to drive economic growth, promote sustainable practices, ensure improved livelihoods and support the wellbeing of our people. Thank you for this opportunity, *vinaka*.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate for the response.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for giving me this opportunity to respond to the honourable Minister's Statement. I also wish to thank the honourable Minister for this initiative in cultivating the pine plantations in the maritime islands.

Most of these pine trees have been standing from 40 to 50 years and most have been destroyed by cyclone or fire. So, the holdings now that are available for logging will be much lesser than what was initially planted 40 years ago.

Mr. Speaker, I thank the Government for responding to the request. Most of these pine plantations run under the scheme of landowners. The planting of the pine was done on an ad hoc basis where the advice to the landowners who were providing the labourers to actually plant the pine seedlings in the initial stage.

So, planting of the pine were done on an *ad hoc* basis and I mean some of the pine were planted on the hillside which the landowners now find difficulty in accessing them. I can say that around Ono in Kadavu the landowners introduced bullocks to pull pine logs, but they had difficulty, and I am thankful to the honourable Minister for initiating this plan to try and harvest this pine scheme.

The honourable Minister stated that they have allocated \$250,000 for a jetty at Wainiyabia. I would urge him to check that amount if it will be able to build a jetty. I know for a fact that deep waters in Wainiyabia is about 200 metres from the shoreline, \$250,000, I think is at the lower end of the scale.

I agree with the honourable Minister that the development on the infrastructure, roads and wharves to be built to access this pine logging would give access to other natural resources, farmers will be able to access their farms and will provide the impetus for them to farm and sell their products to the market. I think that is a positive outlook that can be reached out of this scheme that is going on now.

I understand if the logs are left to stand without this assistance, these logs will finally be destroyed. The landowners do not have the capacity nor the financial background to be able to harvest even though they had laboured in the past 40 years not only to plant these pine plantations but also to look after them during all these years.

This is a positive move and I urge the Government to provide more assistance to the Fiji Pine Trust which has been looking after this pine plantation for the last 30 years. I understand that Fiji Pine initiated this move but found out that it was uneconomical midway 20 years or 30 years ago and abandoned the initiative and that responsibility was given to the Fiji Pine Trust.

I would urge that more funding is given to the Fiji Pine Trust to assist them to assist all the landowners who are owners of these pine schemes. They are isolated and with the distance from the market, it is quite difficult for them to transport to either Lautoka or the other markets that are available to resale these commodities to merchants.

Again, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for realistic and I hope that this initiative will go to the other islands in the maritime zone of Lomaiviti, Lau and in Kadavu.

Fiji's Transition to Open Skies

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; I am honored to enlighten this distinguished Parliament regarding the Open Skies Air Services Agreements in relation to Fiji's Aviation Policy.

Fiji's aviation sector is pivotal, linking Fijians globally, bolstering tourism, trade and employment, and serving our Pacific communities. It is a cornerstone of economic activity, with various metrics highlighting its significance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government has endorsed amending the Civil Aviation Policy to adopt open skies on a case-by-case basis, recognising both global benefits and regional challenges.

The industry is a global connector, fostering interactions among people, cultures, and businesses. It is a substantial economic contributor, with the International Air Transport Association (IATA) reporting that Fiji's air transport, including airlines and their supply chain, supports US\$465 billion of GDP, with foreign tourism adding US\$1.7 billion, totaling 43 percent of the nation's GDP.

Despite the challenges, aviation has shown resilience and growth, doubling in size every 15 years. Fiji's aviation policy framework aims to enhance connectivity, ensuring efficient market access, air navigation, aircraft and airport systems, and security, yielding benefits like improved travel experiences, economic growth, and increased traffic.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the aviation industry's access to markets worldwide relies heavily on the Air Services Agreement (ASA). Also known as air transport agreements or bilateral and multilateral air agreements, these contracts between countries set the terms and regulations for international air transport services. They provide the framework for airlines from participating countries to offer passenger and cargo services.

As an illustration, Fiji has 27 traditional bilateral ASAs with other nations. For instance, our current ASA with the United States permits Fiji Airways to fly to Honolulu, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Any expansion to additional US destinations would require further negotiations between the Fijian and US Governments. Efforts over the past few years to amend this Agreement with the United States have been unsuccessful.

The United States is a leader in Open Skies ASAs and has always viewed Fiji Aviation Policy as restrictive. Traditional ASAs govern several critical areas, including airline designation, ownership and control, routes and capacity, tariffs and pricing, safety and security, customs and immigration, as well as code-sharing and alliances.

Mr. Speaker Sir, traditional bilateral ASAs often involved reciprocal benefits, where each country secured advantages for their carriers, sometimes neglecting consumer interests. Increasing international market access for air service providers is crucial for maximizing the air transport sector's economic contribution. Liberalization, as seen in open-skies agreements, reduces regulations on capacity and frequency, fostering competition, promoting travel and trade, and boosting productivity.

Open skies agreements allow unlimited commercial services by designated airlines without needing explicit ministerial approval for routes, capacity, frequency and pricing. Sovereignty is preserved, with interventions limited to safety and security. These agreements liberalize and deregulate the international aviation market. Key features include no route restrictions, unlimited frequency and capacity, and deregulated pricing, where airlines set fares based on market conditions.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the degree of "sky openness" is determined by the nine "freedoms of the air" outlined in the 1944 Convention on International Civil Aviation:

1. First Freedom: Fly across a country without landing.
2. Second Freedom: Land for non-traffic purposes.
3. Third Freedom: Drop off passengers from the airline's home country.
4. Fourth Freedom: Pick up passengers to take to the airline's home country.
5. Fifth Freedom: Carry passengers between two foreign countries during flights that also touch the airline's home country.

Beyond these, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) considers the additional freedoms "so-called" as they are not widely recognised by treaty:

6. Sixth Freedom: Carry passengers between two foreign countries via the airline's home country.
7. Seventh Freedom: Operate flights between two foreign countries without touching the airline's home country.
8. Eighth Freedom: Transport cabotage traffic between two points within a foreign country, as part of a flight to/from the home country.
9. Ninth Freedom: Transport cabotage traffic entirely within a foreign country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, bilateral Open Skies ASAs provide unrestricted market access, including Third Freedom, Fourth Freedom and Fifth Freedom traffic rights, capacity, frequencies, code-sharing and tariffs. The first Agreement was signed in 1992 between the Netherlands and the United States. Since then, over 300 such Agreements have been signed involving more than 150 countries, with the US leading with 119 Agreements.

Many countries have also signed Open Skies Agreements with the European Union or its members. Open Skies Agreements have driven the continuous growth of air traffic. These measures enhance market and capital access, leading to better connectivity, sustainable economic development, and stronger, more passenger-friendly carriers and airports. Opening the air transport market results in more efficient airspace utilisation, competitive fares and more travel choices.

Liberalisation positively impacts tourism, employment and the economy. Improved air cargo connectivity boosts productivity, opens new markets, enhances exports and increases domestic market competition from foreign producers. The push for regulatory convergence on liberalisation and competition at bilateral and regional levels underscores its importance.

Mr. Speaker Sir, we are now embracing open skies boldly. The Maldives, similar to other Small Island Developing States, like Fiji, faces limitations due to small land mass and high transport costs. However, its open skies policy has eliminated isolation issues, ensuring good connections to labour and markets. In 2023, the Maldives welcomed 1,878,537 visitors, a 12.1 percent increase from 2022, showing the benefits of open skies.

Our neighbours Australia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea, have adopted open skies policies, reaping benefits such as increased travel and trade, enhanced productivity and high-quality job creation. We must envision a future without constraints. While Fiji previously believed that open skies were unsuitable for small economies, this has not been tested. Our Coalition Government is now promoting and adopting open skies.

Mr. Speaker Sir, with liberalisation, discussions are underway with the United States to finalize an Open Skies Agreement, allowing our national airline to operate to various US destinations, thereby boosting trade and tourism. We support our national airline and are committed to elevating our economic growth through enhanced air connectivity, competition and better consumer choices. We have embraced open skies in our Aviation Policy, to ensure Fiji is not left behind.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the Coalition Government fully supports our national airline's network diversification plans to enhance profitability through the open skies policies. We believe Open Skies Agreements will enable airlines to operate commercially, allocate capital efficiently and adapt to changes. This policy will help our national airline expand, optimise capacity and ownership, and improve return on investment.

We will, however, closely monitor global open skies trends to ensure no negative impact on our national airline. We have taken a balanced approach to liberalisation, providing flexibility and freedom, while ensuring local air transport remains profitable and continuous.

Fiji commits to evaluating Open Skies Agreements individually, considering economic, strategic and operational factors. We support this transition to open skies, working with stakeholders to ensure it aligns with national objectives. This policy balances global open skies trends with Fiji's unique context, emphasising flexibility, pragmatism and national interests. For tourism, Fiji achieved a significant milestone by welcoming a record 929,740 visitors in 2023. This surge in tourism contributed to over FJ\$3.3 billion in revenue, exceeding our financial goals a year ahead of schedule.

Looking forward into 2024, we expect a steady growth in visitor arrivals, projected to increase by 2 percent to 5 percent, compared to the previous year. With improved airline capacity, we anticipate better accessibility to our islands at an average of 8 percent to 12 percent increase in flights. The thriving investment environment in Fiji, marked by the opening of new resorts and the launch of significant developments, signals a strong investment scene, promising a bright future for our tourism sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the next four years, we plan to grow our visitor economy by an additional \$1 billion and that is very exciting, indeed, for Fiji.

I was horrified by the poor attitude shown by honourable Maharaj towards Tourism. He said on Monday, and I quote, “Vanua Levu economy does not depend on tourism, we do not rely on tourism”. Mr. Speaker, Vanua Levu has huge potential for tourism and tourists increase its share for the billions in tourism and help make more billions from tourism for Fiji. He scoffed at the US\$200 billion that will be deployed in Vanua Levu to improve the infrastructure and improve the opportunities for tourism.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Very poor, very poor!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- That is \$447 million, Mr. Speaker. I wish you would all agree that tourism is important also for Vanua Levu, and for the Coalition Government, we are plying apply about US\$200 million to create an environment conducive to the tourism industry.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- \$10 million hotel development.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- I know, Mr. Speaker, that the air fare is still high in Vanua Levu, but with these improved investments, improve in infrastructure, with ATR landing in Taveuni and Labasa and better connectivity in Savusavu with frequency and volume, the air fares will come down. It is simple economics, so we are getting there.

(Honourable Opposition Members interject)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- You have no idea, no idea.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- With more frequency and more volume, the air fare will come down. So, it is not aggressively/drastically stopping at all these programmes.

The Open Skies policy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is expected to significantly enhance Fiji’s tourism industry, a major source of revenue and employment. This policy change, is set to create new opportunities for Fiji’s tourism and aviation industries, improve connectivity and potentially increase visitor numbers, which are crucial for the island nation’s economy.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Open Skies offer significant economic benefits for consumers, airlines, airports, communities and economies. Increasing international market access to our national airline is crucial for maximising the air transport sector’s economic contribution.

Let us unite in support of Fiji Airways and allow it to thrive under the Open Skies Policy. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, I want to reiterate, I have only got five minutes but I want to start off with the quote from a message delivered by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation on 7th March, 2023, which is a good date to

remember because 7th is my birthday, and I quote: “For a small country like Fiji, you cannot go for open skies because when you go for open skies, the big boys ...

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Case by case.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Not case by case, just listen. This was only 12 months ago.

“When you go for open skies, the big boys can come and compete with our national airlines and that will be damaging for us, and we need our airlines to survive.”

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- 12 months ago he said that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

HON. F.S. KOYA.- There are many things. We all support tourism...

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- It’s on a one-on-one basis.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- But remember this, open skies could be the death warrant for Fiji Airways, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, two of the most important people in the industry would be the Minister responsible for Tourism and Civil Aviation and the CEO of Fiji Airways. Let me quote about what the CEO for Fiji Airways, Mr. Andre Viljoen, actually said in June 2018. He expressed concerns about the impact of open skies policy on a small national carrier, like Fiji Airways.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is what you call, ‘flipping and flopping’.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the same CEO, and he warned that while increased competition might lower airfares, it could also lead to the demise of the national airlines.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, this very airline saved our behind during COVID-19, so we must protect it at all costs, Sir. If we start even thinking about Open Skies, he spoke about all the different freedoms, Mr. Speaker, we are asking for trouble if we really go down the road because his narrative now, his open skies, what can we do for Fiji? Sir, we have not even done our homework with respect to that at the moment.

He mentioned Maldives very proudly. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Maldives does not even have an international airline anymore because of this Open Skies Policy. He is buried and dead, Sir. We cannot, we must not, and we should not ever go down this road where we are actually going to write and basically write a death warrant for Fiji Airways.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what changed in the last 12 months? What has actually changed?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- No, no, he has changed. The CEO of Fiji Airways has changed. Do not wave because I do not think you know anything about it.

Countries that have adopted Open Skies policy, invariably, what happens is that the larger airlines actually come in and cannibalise the local airlines. Sir, we cannot compete, but we have done this in such a sustainable fashion upto now. Why can we not continue to do so? We cannot even cater for more tourists, at the moment, because we do not have the necessary hotels. We need to concentrate on building more hotels, so that is probably what the target should be, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, talking about Open Skies now should be something at a very much later stage. We need to put more rooms on the ground. Investments and policies need to be created for that. We have had office from the Emirates, the US, so why are we now pandering to all those things that we should not be doing right now, because the necessary infrastructure with respect to more tourists in Fiji is not on the ground yet?

We want tourism to grow, I am telling you, honourable Minister. Of course, we want tourism to grow. We want tourism to grow in the North, we want tourism to grow in my side of the country - the West even more, Sir, but we cannot do this in an unsustainable fashion. We must always ensure that when we speak, we check every single word that we actually say. He only said this 12 months ago.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when you sign this ASA agreement, there are Fifth and Sixth Freedoms, et cetera, that he actually spoke about. You must be very wise about how you do this. The previous Permanent Secretaries at Civil Aviation have also spoken about this, Andre Viljoen himself has actually spoken about this, he himself has spoken about this, the former Minister for Civil Aviation has spoken about this - all were on the same page. Why is he changing now, Mr. Speaker, Sir? Please, honourable Minister, be very careful where you tread with respect to Open Skies.

I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order! No running commentaries, honourable Members. The speaker has spoken and that is it.

Financial Management Information System

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I begin my Ministerial Statement, I think honourable Koya was a bit more excited than I thought he would be. I think the idea of Open Skies ASA is actually a contractual framework between a service provider and a client, which specifies a number of different aspects of how it is going to be done. So, all that hoo-haa about Open Skies and suddenly things will end is not going to happen because the Agreement itself is going to be looked at carefully.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me provide an update on the replacement of the Government's Financial Management Information System, which is scheduled to go live on 1st August, 2024. What is the Financial Management System and Payroll System?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Finance has been undergoing numerous reforms to modernise its IT systems and processes and had embarked on a major IT project to replace the current

two-decade old Financial Management Information System (FMIS) and the 40-year-old payroll system.

The FMIS system, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the accounting system for the whole of Government. So, each year, when the Budget is prepared and approved by Parliament, the Ministry of Finance uploads the entire Budget Appropriation on FMIS. Funds are allocated to individual Heads of appropriations, which is managed by the respective Permanent Secretaries who are the Chief Accounting Officers for their Ministries.

During the financial year when a Ministry wants to procure an item, the accounting staff of that agency will get on to FMIS and make a commitment to issue an LPO. Once the item is supplied and the invoice is issued by the supplier, the LPO will be closed in the FMIS, and a payment will be generated online with funds transferred to the respective bank account of the vendor. This, then, Mr. Speaker, Sir, creates an accounting transaction which gets recorded in the FMIS. Such transactions happen daily in different agencies throughout the financial year.

Apart from this, there are other known expenditure and accounting processes including Request to Incur Expenditure (RIE), virements, cashflow adjustments, excess approvals, reconciliations, redeployments and procurement processes that continue throughout the year.

Once the financial year is completed, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FMIS is used to generate all financial reports that are then audited by the Office of the Auditor-General, submitted back to Parliament for further debate and scrutiny on the use of public funds.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all these processes used to be done manually around 20 years ago. However, the former SDL Government, led by the late Mr. Laisenia Qarase, then instituted a major financial reform between 2004 to 2006, which included the roll out of the current FMIS system that we are using. I think it was a forward-looking strategy and thinking and system change by the SDL Government.

Back then, the size of the budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was only around 25 percent of the current Government spending. The number of users were also significantly lower, and the volume of transactions were also small.

Similarly, we also had a "stand-alone" Payroll System which used to pay the salaries of all civil servants, including Parliamentarians like us. This system is centrally managed by the Ministry of Finance to pay the salaries of about 35,000 civil servants. This payroll system was not integrated with the FMIS. In layman's language, the two systems, Mr. Speaker, Sir, were not talking to each other.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we came into Government 17 months ago, the Permanent Secretary for Finance and his team provided me a briefing on the state of the economy and public finances, on the current systems and processes of the Ministry of Finance, the legislations and policies that guide the operations of the Ministry, and our major deliverables and plans.

During that briefing, I was quite shocked when they highlighted to me about the challenges with the current FMIS system and a very desperate and shocking situation with the 40-year-old Payroll System. This was highlighted as the highest operational and accountability risk, not only for the Ministry of Finance, but for the whole of Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Since then and immediately after that, we made that as one of our top priorities and, with the approval of Parliament, for a total budget of about \$14 million for a new FMIS which will have an inbuilt payroll system.

The Ministry of Finance, in fact, Mr. Speaker, did a very good job, together with the support from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) (all the technical support was provided by ADB), and we embarked on developing a new system.

Let me start with the Payroll System, Mr. Speaker, because it is important for me to explain what was there. The existing payroll system was tailor-made for the Fijian Government and had been in existence for over 40 years since 1984. This system was developed by a local company called "Solutions for Business", which was managed and operated by an individual named Mr. Barry Kay.

I pay tribute to this great gentleman, who passed away later last year at the age of 86. He was the only person, Mr. Speaker, Sir, who, over the years, was providing the technical backup, despite all the challenges and hiccups that the Ministry of Finance staff, at the back end of the activities, were trying to handle.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when this Payroll System was developed 40 years ago, it served the purpose at that time but, over the years, piecemeal changes were made, and the system had lagged behind and it was not what ought to be a modern Payroll System.

There were a number of challenges that the Payroll System created for the Ministry of Finance staff, for the Office of the Auditor-General, for the timely production of Annual Reports and activities because the Payroll System was not integrated with the FMIS which was rolled out in 2006, as I have said, by the SDL Government. This meant that the payroll activity is actually not available on the FMIS on a real time basis. This lack of integration and control has led to the overspending on their salary budget by many agencies, year after year, and if you look at the Reports of the Office of the Auditor-General, Mr. Speaker, Sir, every year that issue has been highlighted.

There are several processes that have to be manually input into the system with no provision of uploads and attachments that could have brought out efficiency. Third and the most critical issue was that the payroll software was managed, as I had said, by a single person, who was getting on in his life, his health was not very good and at one point, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were panicking that if something happens to him and the system collapses, there was no one who had been trained, except one person that we identified and we quickly hired her to come as a consultant and provide some support in case there was a disaster.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FMIS system had also become quite outdated with a number of challenges in terms of controls, reporting, efficiency and system security. Reports had to be manually extracted, and part of the reason why Ministries were not able to produce annual reports on time was that the system was not generating all these reports easily, and they used to spend a lot of time manually extracting the information and basically, the capabilities were not there as a modern system.

There was, obviously, a little or no provision available to upgrade the system to meet our accounting needs which has evolved and become more complex over time. Apart from this, the current FMIS is only accessible through GOVNET, which means that staff cannot directly access FMIS from homes or other locations if they want to work and look at how the challenges could be met.

The engagement of ADB, Mr. Speaker, Sir, provided us with a lot of technical support, with the experience that the ADB had in putting in place this, sort of, systems around the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the ADB's technical assessment, as a first step, it was very clear that the current FMIS and the Payroll System cannot be brought together in any technical way and, therefore, there was a need for a new system. We immediately made sure that we went through an international

local tender process, and this went through a technical evaluation committee and the tender was approved, chaired by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the international company called Bisan Solutions which specialises in government Public Financial Management Systems which has done this in countries such as US, Belgium and many others around the world, including Marshall Islands in the Pacific. The total cost is estimated to be around \$12 million, and when everything is fully operational, the backup and service fee would be covered as part of that budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must say that after 14 months, immediately after that briefing, we embarked on to it, and it has taken us 14 months of hard work to get this system ready. The training is all done now, to GO LIVE on 1st August - the start of the new financial year.

What are the benefits of this, Mr. Speaker, Sir? Once we GO LIVE, the new system will bring about greater efficiency in our accounting processes, improve financial reporting, strengthen internal controls and audit trails and enhance the security of the system which will also be web-based.

Overall, financial processing and reporting will be enhanced with real-time transaction updates which is useful for management decision-making and policy formulation. Apart from this, Financial Statements will be directly extracted, Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the system with significant improvements in timelines for Ministries and Departments in preparation of accounts, audit and presentation. In fact, Sir, we think that this will create real time production of accounts, time for audits and timely presentation of reports to Parliament, as it happens in many other countries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also undertaking work to integrate the new FMIS with the Budget and Debt Management System, in fact, the whole budget process. In fact, I was also surprised when I came in last year that the whole budget process is excel-based. The Ministry of Finance is also working towards a budget software which will be integrated with the new FMIS at a later stage because it is almost like doing the whole budget process manually. That was a big concern to me in this day and age of technology.

The new FMIS will also eliminate any manual intervention, like data punching, and majority of the payroll-related calculations will be possible through the new system, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It will also be easier to generate *ad hoc* reports and customize reports with new parameters to suit the needs of the users and decision-making process. For example, we had a written question from honourable Premila Kumar. Those sorts of reports, Sir, is not easy right now with the current system for us to generate and this is why all this kind of information was always available as part of annual reports or audit reports.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me say that this new system, apart from making so much easier for the staff, for the Office of the Auditor-General or audit trails, it will also provide better analytics which will allow us to desegregate financial and accounting data to categories, like climate change, gender-based activities, simply with a click of a button.

I would say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a major transformative project to modernize the Government Financial Management Information System and this fits in well with all the major financial management reforms that the Ministry has undertaken. I want to just quickly highlight some of those:

1. The various legislative amendments to the Financial Management Act, Financial Instructions, Procurement Regulations, Audit Act, Statistics Act, with the objective to

improve financial management and governance, including improved transparency, accountability, external oversight and greater independence to our Audit and Statistics Office.

2. The strengthening of the budget formulation process with the new Public Sector Investment Programme Guidelines that improves the appraisal and selection of capital projects with a better value for money and effectiveness in achieving the outcomes.
3. We established the Strategic Planning Office which is now a fully-fledged Office within the Ministry of Finance, which was always there, which is also currently formulating the new National Development Plan.
4. The new Debt Management Strategy which is focused on reducing the Debt-to-GDP ratio, reducing the cost of debt by accessing more concessional loans to multilateral, bilateral and other effective liability management options, and rests on timely data assessment and analysis that can inform policy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have said, this is one of the major transformative reforms that the Government has undertaken and this should be a legacy of the Coalition Government - to provide a system that will improve accountability, transparency, audit, timely submission of reports to Parliament, as well as to the people of Fiji.

I want to take this opportunity, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to thank the entire FMIS Team. There are 20 people from within the Ministry of Finance who were working almost full time, day and night, led by the Head of Treasury, Mr. Atin Chand, and all the staff across Government agency, for all the hard work because without them, we would not have got all the processes and systems aligned with the technical aspects of the system. I want to really thank them.

Also, I want to thank my Permanent Secretary, Mr. Shiri Gounder, for his leadership and the hard work and many hours of late-night work towards this project and various other financial management reforms that we have been able to undertake in the last 17 months since we came into Government.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have said, we are on schedule for a new FMIS to GO LIVE on 1st August, 2024, which is the start of a new financial year. Let me say that we are now working on the Budget and once we are able to add to the current system, the process of Budget will become so much easier for the Government and the Ministry of Finance and all the staff, not only the Ministry of Finance but throughout the Government, to be able to access, produce reports, and ensure that it is done in a timely manner. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for Finance for his Ministerial Statement.

While we are living in the 21st century, technology is very important, no doubt about it. We need technology, we need a new system, and the system needs to be upgraded in order to actually have some better controls. There have been a lot of attempts previously under the digitalFIJI Programme as well, whereby the honourable Minister would now know that our systems are not talking to each other, especially when we have a budget of more than \$4 billion.

When the system from one Ministry is not talking to another Ministry's system, it becomes very difficult for Ministry of Finance to account for the money that was given to the Ministry, and the amount of money that is being utilised by the Ministry. All these systems need to be talking to

each other. We need to have a centralised system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a very good step forward, we are trying to develop something because if we look at the system nowadays, especially when it comes to commercial companies, there are three aspects - there is an Accounting System, an Inventory Management and there is Payroll. All these systems talk to each other.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what we have seen in Government for decades, there is a huge disconnect. For example, at the moment, as the honourable Minister was saying is implementing that particular component in the Ministry of Finance. If we look at Ministry of Health and the Fiji Pharmaceutical and Biomedical Services (FPBS), these two systems are not linked to each other. Government Pharmacy, being one of the major buyers of Government, spends almost close to \$60 million but there is no systematic way of reporting back to the Ministry of Finance when it comes to the reporting system through a particular software, Sir.

It is a very good move by the Ministry of Finance that they are trying to implement. What I would like to suggest is, there are certain entities, such as Municipal Councils, Provincial Councils, where we need to implement the software. Very rightfully said, things are done on manual basis and when things are done manually, the records go missing. People are leaving, there is no proper record of receipts, and the reports get delayed, before it is presented to Parliament.

Sir, I have a suggestion, if we can expand this particular programme to all other Ministries and anywhere, particularly where the Government grant is going. I have mentioned the Ministry of Health and FPBS is one of the major spenders with almost \$60 million, likewise, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Education where Government gives huge amounts as grants to schools but, again, there is no proper recording system or there is no proper way to report back to the Ministry of Education on how the grant is actually utilised because that is taxpayers' money.

We need to go to that extent because I believe close to \$250 million to \$300 million is given to high schools and primary schools as grant, so we need to be accountable. If that can be done and very rightfully said by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, we now have Starlink that will provide connectivity throughout Fiji, we can actually have systems in schools hooking up to this networking system where they can use the software to report back to the Ministry of Finance.

In a nutshell, I would like to say, this is a very good programme. Succession plan is very important. We need to train the right people and retain them within the Ministry to look after that. Rightfully, Sir, if we actually rely on one person and if he is no longer there, the system can collapse. If we are actually looking at a payroll system, we might be dealing with close to 30,000 civil servants who will be affected, including Members of Parliament and Ministers as well. So, we need to have some backup plans and to have backup servers whereby we can actually keep this data. We do not want a system which transpired some years ago, that collapsed, and we did not have a backup system. So, we need to work on these kinds of issues in order to implement, and I would like to thank the honourable Minister for taking this initiative and project on board.

MR. SPEAKER.- The Ministry of Health, as you have highlighted, is not part and parcel of what they are trying. Now, they are bringing in the Ministry of Health.

When you look back at past Governments' decisions, beginning from SDL, they kind of lack that. For example, the Ministry of Health run on their own, they did their own pay rise, et cetera. But when it came to the future governments like FijiFirst, they did likewise too. They increased the pay of the doctors without aligning to what has been recommended now.

Now, we have reached a stage where even the Ministry of Home Affairs is having trouble with running their own payroll. Now, we need to converge them together and see, like you have stated, there is accountability and transparency into how decisions are going to be made. It comes right down to the recruitment process.

You may recall that when we were in the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, we asked the Ministry of Finance, “What is the problem with this?” The usual answer from the Permanent Secretary then, a Rotuman lady, “We do not have the capacity.” But they have been tasked with that responsibility, the Permanent Secretaries. Hopefully, having been reassured by your support and the support of the Opposition to this Government initiative, we hope things would turn out for the better.

Honourable Members, I intend to adjourn Parliament now since the Standing Order Executive Committee would be meeting in the Small Committee Room to discuss issues that have been pending, so that we may address things rather quickly when Parliament is still in session.

We are going to adjourn now, and we will resume at about 3.00 p.m. or 3.15 p.m., when the bell is sounded.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.38 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 3.22 p.m.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

LTA's Safe Operating System (Question No. 66/2024)

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport inform Parliament on the security measures taken by the Land Transport Authority to ensure its Operating System is safe and protected from possible hacking, tampering and manipulation?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Tuinaceva for the question. I rise to provide this august Parliament a response to that question regarding the security measures taken by Land Transport Authority (LTA) to ensure its operation system is safe and protected from possible hacking.

Sir, the LTA has, in place, an operating system that is user friendly and provide its essential services and daily operations of the organisation. The use of this system operation helps increase productivity and efficiency, conducts security multiple tasks simultaneously to ease the workflow.

Over the years, it has been upgrading this operating systems according to its competencies and to enhance business processes. However, the more developed and advanced as we get in terms of technology, we need to ensure that the risks of manipulation and hacking is prevented or reduced, especially with great impact particularly those who depend on these services for their daily businesses.

The LTA system is no exception. To address this issue, Sir, the LTA through its IT Department has implemented the following measures to protect its systems and data from hacking, tampering or manipulation:

1. Network Perimeter Firewalls that scans, and authorizes network data traffic, stops unauthorised any intrusive access into LTA systems and data by blocking or mitigating potential security threats in real time.
2. Anti-virus and Anti-malware software that manages all end-user devices and service systems to detect and remove malicious software, including viruses, worms, trojans and spyware from the system. This is backed up by Malservice that monitors all events and alerts, generated 24/7, ensuring proactive and remediation applied as and when necessary.
3. Email security is another big issue where all incoming emails are scanned to protect against malware, ransomware and phishing scams. All emails that are suspicious or present anomalies are blocked or mitigated in terms of securities in real time.
4. Conducting preventative maintenance to regularly apply security patches and updates provided by the operating system to address known vulnerabilities.

5. Conducting vulnerability assessments and penetration testing ongoing in terms of the network and the websites. So, a detailed report and remediation is then followed through.
6. Implementing stronger user authentication mechanisms, such as complex password requirements, mandatory changing of passwords at intervals.
7. Conducting access audits to ensure authorised users have access to the appropriate data and systems.

The Authority has plans to further enhance its security cautions and evaluate the following tools, such as web application firewalls, security operation center with log management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to the protective measures to the LTA's operating system, LTA also has in place the following:

1. Policies and Standards of Procedures, governing its business processes in its daily operations. These are reviewed regularly to ensure regulatory compliance and, of course, accommodate any necessary changes and challenges.
2. Audit investigations is an ongoing process, particularly in high risk areas in terms of risk control and mitigation.
3. Reconciliations are carried out regularly in order to ensure accuracy in the financial statements, data, stocks and other data which is provided to the customers. Thank you, Sir.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question. Can the honourable Minister confirm that due to system failure, that permits were still being illegally issued when the permit freeze was still in place?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I am not sure whether I can comment on it because currently it is with the courts. So, I prefer not to comment in case it might prejudice the investigation because your question borders on the processes involved which also involves certain staff who have been taken to task at the moment.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to clarify, the question was simple. Can he confirm whether there were permits still illegally issued when the permit freeze was on because of the system? It is a yes or no answer.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- The freeze is currently on and that happened while the freeze was still on, so it happened during the freeze.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, in the first part of the question, I think there are a couple of things. You are talking about hacking, tampering and manipulation. In terms of manipulation, can you tell Parliament, if a truck comes in to get weighed and if it is overweight, is it connected to headquarters so that headquarters knows that a particular truck has come in and its overweight and an alarm bell rings? Is it connected yet or not?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU. - Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not have that information with me but what I know is that when the truck comes in, the printout is done there. I will need to verify that and get back to you. Thank you.

HON. F.S. KOYA. - In that case, if you do not know, is that not something that leads to

corruption and should that not be something that you immediately deal with?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU. - Yes, that is a possibility. At the moment, we have budgeted for upgrading all our IT systems so that they are, I suppose, interconnected. That is currently ongoing, and we aim to have those systems interrelated and I suppose talking to each other in the current project.

HON. V. LAL. - Mr. Speaker, Sir, can the honourable Minister inform Parliament what measures are in place to ensure that LTA employees are adequately trained and are aware of the cyber security threats?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU. - Yes, of course, in terms of training, that is an ongoing exercise in all organizations, including LTA. They have also done their own training needs analysis as part of their HR strategy which includes what you have raised.

Consultation on Crown Grants and Native Grants
(Question No. 67/2024)

HON. J.R. VOCEA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage, and Arts update Parliament on the consultation iTLTB is undertaking on Crown grants and Native grants?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the question posed by honourable Vocea and I thank the honourable Member for the question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I respond to the question, let me assure Parliament and the general public, that this consultation is a normal process that has always been carried out by the Reserve Commissioner. When it receives any claimant, it needs to go and carry out consultations - to have a feel on the ground and the truth about the claimants that have been sent to iTLTB. This process was stopped in 2010. I want to assure the general public that this consultation does not affect the current tenant and there is no need to worry.

Kivei kemuni na noda ko ni vakarorogo tiko mai, au tucake me'u na sauma vakalekaleka na veika eratou qarava voli na Tabacakacaka ni Qele Maroro'i ena nodratou veivakararamataki me baleta eso na kerekere e dau gole yani vei iratou mai vei kemuni na i taukei ni qele. Oqo e dua na i tavi ga ka ratou dau qarava, ni dau yaco mai vei iratou eso na kerekere.

Ia, a mai vakacegui tu vakalekaleka ena 2010, ka sa lewe levu sara era volavola mai ena nodra gadreva tiko mera vakararamataki ena nodra kerekere. Au vinakata me'u vakadeitaki kemuni ni nodra dodonu o ira era dabeca tiko na vei qele yadudua, e rokova na Matanitu na nodra dodonu, ka na raica talega na Matanitu ni na rokovi tiko ena veigauna taucoko sara.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me, first, provide some background. State freehold land originated from either a Crown Grant or a Native Grant title. Some parcels have retained the freehold title and are known as State freehold land, while some have cancelled titles and are now known as State freehold land without title.

Crown grant was given the title for land that were sold prior to the Deed of Cession. The sale of these land was validated by the Land Claims Commission of 1876, after the public hearing of individual cases. A total of 1,582 Crown Grants, covering an area of 152,850 hectares, were

registered because of the Commission's work.

The Native Grant is the land that was purchased under the Native Land Acquisition Ordinance 1905, after the then Governor Imthurn reopened the sale of the land. Under that legislation, a total of 206 Native Grants, covering an area of approximately 42,440 hectares, were issued before the land sale was finally stopped.

On the need to claim State land for reserve and reversion, before Cession, the sale of iTaukei land was rampant and was not controlled by any central authority. After the Deed of Cession was executed in 1874, the Governor then, Sir Arthur Gordon, discontinued all sale of iTaukei land.

Over the years, grievances over the sale of iTaukei land began to surface from iTaukei landowning units. When unsolved, these grievances led to widespread disillusionment and ongoing disputes between landowners, tenants, Government and iTLTB.

The iTaukei Lands Commission records revealed that 223 landowning units (*mataqali* and *tokatoka*) are dependent units that do not own any land and the following are the reasons why they lost their land.

- They were sold and became freehold land. Tribal land were sold by some chiefs without their knowledge and are now classified as freehold through Crown Grant.
- They were absent during the Land Commission Inquiry. The original landowners were not present to lay their claims at the time of the Native Lands Commission land inquiry held soon after Cession, thus their land were taken up by the State.
- The 1905 Native Land Ordinance reopened the sale of *iTaukei* land which is now freehold land known as Native Grant.
- The sale of land owned by *mataqali* landowners with a declining population, were aligned and recorded under other landowning units.
- In 1905, the Native Land Ordinance allowed for acquisition of unused *iTaukei* land by Government for long-term leasing where some were for 999 years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the two legislations used to process the claims are:

1. State Lands Act, under section 8, dealing with reversion, states and I quote:

“Where any *iTaukei* land has been acquired by the State for any public purpose under the provision of the State Acquisition of Lands Act or any other written law, is no longer required for such purposes. The Minister (for Lands) after consultation with Cabinet may, by order, declare such land to be *iTaukei* land and such declaration shall be recorded in the Unit from which the land was acquired in the register of *iTaukei* land.”

2. iTaukei Land Trust Act, under section 18, dealing with reservation, states and I quote:

“If the Minister (for iTaukei Affairs) is satisfied that land belonging to any *mataqali* is insufficient for their use, maintenance and support of its members, it shall be lawful for the Minister by proclamation to set aside such State land or land acquired for and on behalf of the *iTaukei* by purchase as in his opinion may

be required for the use and maintenance and support of such *mataqali*.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me now highlight the reversion and reservation processes of State Land under the two legislations I have mentioned.

1. The iTLTB, through the Reserves Commission, carries out consultations with the claimants through formal inquiries and inspection of their *iTaukei* land holdings. The Commission also gathers other evidence to support the claims of the *iTaukei* landowners.
2. A report with supporting evidence and recommendations is submitted to the iTLTB Board of Trustees for consideration.
3. Upon approval, the Board resolution is conveyed to the Ministry of Lands for their verification and approval.
4. The Minister for Lands, upon completion of the verification process, will then table a paper before Cabinet.
5. Upon Cabinet approval -
 - For reservation cases under section 18 of the iTaukei Land Trust Act, the Minister for iTaukei Affairs will publish a proclamation notice by gazette and the claimed land will then become an *iTaukei* reserve.
 - For reversion case under section 8 of the State Lands Act, the Minister for Lands will publish an order by gazette and the claimed land will become *iTaukei* land.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reserve seating schedule published by the *Fiji Sun* on 27th February, 2024, was to inform the public that the Reserve Commission intended to hold consultations with iTaukei landowning units who had submitted their claims over State freehold land. These claims which had been pending since 2010, naturally resulted in a long list.

The Reserve Commission was mobilised to investigate the claims. The reserve sittings commenced on Monday, 11th March, 2024, and was scheduled to be completed on 22nd May, 2024. The sittings were to be held in various *Vanua* - in the province of Tailevu, Rewa, Naitasiri, Serua, Ra, Ba, Nadroga, Lomaiviti, Bua, Macuata and Cakaudrove.

The sittings were suspended on 9th April, 2024, to enable a recent Cabinet-mandated Committee on the issue, chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications, to re-asses the framework and propose to Cabinet the next steps to be taken.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, continued work was reported on social media and local dailies which twisted the intention of the Reserve Commission’s hearing on Crown Grant and Native Grant claims. Everything was done above board. The Reserve Commission’s work on this is not new. The Crown Grants and Native Grants have been returned before.

As we have already mentioned, the long list of claims was due to Government’s decision in 2010 not to entertain such claims again. That was a gross injustice to the claimants. We have reversed this for justice for the landowners.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, since I have only one minute, however, I am worried about the poor lessees. What will happen to them? If it is converted into Native land, what will happen?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Just listen to me! Listen to me! I am explaining something, and you are just jumping.

Once the term of the lease expires, then what will happen? On State land when renewal is done, there is no premium charged. So, when it is converted into Native and when you renew the lease, will there be any premium charged on the lands

That is what I am worried about. The lessees will suffer, sugar production will go down, and that is what I am worried about. I am asking the honourable Minister to tell this Parliament that once the lease is expired, whether the term of the lease will be given for 99 years and whether they will charge any premium when you convert that into Native lease? That is what I am asking.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the lease expires, that will be determined by the honourable Minister for Lands, who covers the freehold land, in consultation with the iTLTB. As I have already mentioned, for now, there is no need to worry. The Government has set up a Committee, we are looking at the overall picture of the concerns from the public and we will take care of it.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if a land is converted into *iTaukei* land, how will you then consult with the honourable Minister for Lands when it has already gone to iTaukei Land Trust Board?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- That is the problem. They have less knowledge about land. I am asking, once a land lease has expired, when it is converted into Native lease, what will then happen? He will not be able to discuss with the honourable Minister for Lands because the land has already gone to the iTaukei Land Trust Board. That is my question which he does not understand.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- *Oqoo koya na qele sa identify-taki me na lako me qai qele vaka-i-taukei vei ira era sa kerekere tu. E taroga tiko qo o honourable Kirpal, ena vaka evei o ira oya? Esa na mai veisau me qele vaka- i-taukei ka a qele tu mai vakamatanitu.*

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the Committee's decision is approved by Cabinet, then it will really be a balance - it will take care of the landowners and those who lease on the land. If that is the case, then we will follow. It has already been transferred as *iTaukei* land, so it will go through the process at iTLTB.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Kirpal is raising a very valid question. The other element of his question, honourable Minister, is, will premium be paid since it is now Native land?

HON. I. VASU.- It is the policy for iTLTB at that time. If they need to pay the premium, then it has to apply to everyone.

MR. SPEAKER.- That is where the Government comes in, in paying for premiums of renewal

of leases and all. I stand to be corrected on that as well.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we are speaking about premium, just a question to the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs. The Ministry of Local Government acquired a development lease and a premium was paid at that point in time. I will give a typical example.

Land was acquired at Solove, Labasa. The land was acquired, development lease given to Ministry of Local Government, premium was paid to the *mataqali* by the Government back then and now it is only supposed to be releasing the leases. Now, iTLTB is asking for another premium, when Government actually paid the premium in the first place before acquiring a development lease for this piece of land where the residents are sitting. There are sitting tenants. They are supposed to receive the lease, but they have been asked to pay additional premium of \$18,000 before the lease is issued. Why are we requesting for another premium to be paid when Government has already paid a premium before acquiring the development lease?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just to inform this august Parliament, there is a lot of concern in regards to premium. We have now formed a Committee just to have a look at how the premium is being worked out and we will have to discuss with iTLTB to address the concerns of those who are leasing the land.

In regard to the question regarding the one that has already paid the premium by the Ministry of Local Government, I am willing to discuss it with the iTLTB and I might have to come back with it.

MR. SPEAKER.- It is Solove, Sir, in Labasa?

HON. I. VASU.- Yes, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- The premium was not paid by the Ministry of Local Government but by the Government?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- The Government paid the premium through Ministry of Local Government. A typical example would be Vunivau whereby more than \$1 million was paid to the *mataqali* owners to acquire development lease. Everything is now done, it was just supposed to be distributed with the lease, but now iTLTB stepping in again to tell them to pay another premium because they do not recognise the premium that was paid by the Government to iTLTB back then and now they will have to pay another premium before they receive their proper lease. That is all, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Maharaj, I am trying to make an attempt to clarify this to the honourable Minister. All the mode of payments that goes regarding Native land either comes through the Ministry of Lands to Native Land or straight to Native Land. I do not know, maybe the system has changed then. Now, you are mentioning the Ministry of Local Government, that is quite news to me, but I stand to be corrected there, but we will take it from there.

The honourable Minister has agreed and if you could just write down the particulars of the land - Solove and Vunivau. *Oqo e tamani vanua vakaitamera orau ruarua oqo, na vanua vaka Labasa.*

Ni wawa vakalailai na turaga na Minister, au se dredre mada. Au nanuma de'u sa vakacavara e kea. Anyway, the floor is yours, Sir.

(Laughter)

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you do not agree with what iTLTB has provided to you, you can provide a counteroffer. You can explain to them that the Government has already paid the premium, that there is no need for the individual to pay their own.

MR. SPEAKER.- Who is to do that, Sir, honourable Maharaj? He is just raising the question.

HON. I. VASU.- The tenant, Sir.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to raise a question in *iTaukei*?

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Turaga na Minisita, e sa dau rui balavu toka ni biu cake mai e dua na claim me lako mai veiratou na Reserve, me qai muria cake na gaunisala lako ena Cabinet me lako vei Minisita ni Qele, qai lesu tale mai vei kemuni ni lesu tale mai. Oqo na nodra kudru mai na yasana vei ira nai taukei ni qele era biuta tiko mai na nodra claim. E tiko beka e dua na i tuvatuva me caka e dua na settlement committee me rawa ni raica na vei claim kece e lako mai va qo me rawa ni vakarawarawataka? Me toka edua na kena timi ni veivaqaqai, e dua na kena turaga ni lewa.

Ena dua na gauna, a kau cake mai e dua na Bill, e kila tiko na turaga na Sivika, na “Claims Tribunal Bill”. E qai toka mai eloma edua na Settlement Committee. Ke rawa ni biu mai e dua na tikina vaka oya me rawa ni vakarawarawataka na kena cakacakataka na Reserve na processtaki ni rogoci kei na kena vakaqaqai na claim kece oya. E tiko beka e dua na i tuvatuva?

HON. I. VASU.- Vinaka, na kena sagai me vakatotototaki koya e qaravi tiko ena gauna oqo, oya koya e tiko vakalawa, dodonu me qarava na iTLTB. Au kila kevaka ena vinakati me vakatotototaki, ena vakarau review tiko ‘qo na Act ni iTLTB, ka da na rawa ni da vakatututaka kina na veisau eda vinakata, ka da gadreva na i taukei ni qele.

Leasehold Market Value
(Question No. 68/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources inform Parliament whether the Leasehold Market Value is regulated by any Act or Regulations?

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think honourable Kirpal is all firing this afternoon. He has already tried to get you Mr. Speaker, on his sight.

(Laughter)

The simple answer to a simple question, is whether Leasehold Market Value (LMV) is regulated by an Act or by Regulations, as it is regulated by neither.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as honourable Minister for Lands is aware, most of the State lessees in agricultural land have more than one family living in their house. So, the LMV is a burden and makes it difficult for them to subdivide and get a registered lease because they have to pay 20 percent of the difference in value and also pay the surveyor’s fees and other related costs. My question is, can the honourable Minister for Lands consider that LMV be waived from all the

rezoning of State land? If not, can it be waived from agriculture land which lessees want to rezone to residential for their own use?

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, a good example is the marginal lots.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- That is why we had that conversation during the Business Committee, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I know that the real question was coming behind the question that was on the paper.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Member understands very well the origins of how LMV as a feature of State leases originated in 1995. I think you were there. Also, on the other side of Parliament, there are two former Ministers for Lands who, I am sure, throughout their tenure, they would have approved and agreed on the imposition of those fees for payment. I think what it does or the intent behind it is to ensure that when people move the original lease use to a higher yield use, it is at somewhere that the State also gets the benefit.

What it is suggesting is, we, the Ministry of Lands understand, and I am sure that he also understands from the time when he was with the Ministry that there is a real need for the State to also capitalize on something that we understand, is going to cause a gain to those who currently hold those leases. When they subdivide, for example, and I have some figures here.

When a piece of land that was originally given an agriculture lease is now sought to be rezoned and subdivided into residential, there is a lot of economic gain to the developer. Someone who pays us \$35,000 on LMV goes on to earn a lot far more than that, close to three-quarter of a million dollars.

There is a strong public policy or reason why we should maintain the LMV, even though it is a policy of the Ministry. It is not on the Act, it is not in the regulations, and it is a strong policy that holds water, and it should be maintained.

I think the answer to the honourable Member is that we deal with applications on a case-by-case basis but we often always look towards what is the economic component of that application before the imposition of the 20 percent is left.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Kirpal, I hope you are satisfied with that reply because if I may, many at times it has changed. The laws that we used to base our decisions on at that time when we were both working together, is quite different because for our marginal lots, we allow the relaxation of Town & Country Planning. Instead of paying surveyed lots, we just went for the occupation. We cut one lot into two residential leases and then we give out agreement to leases based on that.

But now since the previous Government had decided to go straight into giving out registered leases and will require a proper survey of the land. That is what you have been asking to be taken away - the survey fees, and they are expensive. But, again, the decision in policy making and all of that have changed a lot. What we see out there in Malolo, that is the same thing that I was asking here.

The previous Government maintained that it wants to give registered leases. So, by going for registered leases, it is quite expensive. Maybe the previous Government thought that the Government could foot the Bill. But with this present Government that is what has been stated by the honourable Minister for Lands. Thank you.

We will move on to the next Oral Question.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the question has been withdrawn. I have advised the Secretariat that the question has been withdrawn. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will take that. You have advised the Secretary-General, on my note, it does not show any change so that is why I raise the question.

We will move on to the fifth Oral Question for today. Honourable Members, I have received notification from the honourable Opposition Whip that honourable Ketan Lal has withdrawn his question as well.

(Question No. 69/2024 and Question No. 70/2024 were withdrawn)

Update – National Minimum Wage Regulations
(Question No. 71/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations update Parliament on the approved review of the National Minimum Wage and the 10 sectoral minimum Wages Regulation, including the proposal of new job classifications within the current Wages Regulation?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Assistant Minister for the question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to provide an update on the National Minimum Wage and the 10 sectoral Minimum Wages Regulations including new job classifications which was endorsed by Cabinet on 9th April, 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Minimum Wage Fixing Machinery Convention, 1928 (No. 26) which Fiji ratified on 19th April, 1974, states in Article 1 Part 1, “that members of the International Labour Organization (ILO) that have ratified the Convention are to create or maintain a machinery whereby minimum rates of wages can be fixed for workers employed in certain trades, or parts of trades”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry has secured a team of four consultants through an Expression of Interest. (EIO). The lead consultant, Professor Anand Chand, is actually the Acting Associate Dean, Research and Innovations at the Fiji National University, and together with him in the team are: Dr. Janesh Sami, Dr. Jone Lako and Dr. Maureen Karan, who are from USP. The team members are currently undertaking a comprehensive Minimum Wage Review.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of the review process, the Ministry through the appointed consultants, ensured that all relevant stakeholders are fully consulted. The team has travelled around Viti Levu and Labasa and has also received written submissions. The team has also consulted the two major social partners - the Fiji Trades Union Congress and the Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation, as well as the Chambers of Commerce and the rest of them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the proposal of new job classifications within the current Wage Regulations, the Ministry has appointed 10 wages Councils, together with a common chairperson who will be undertaking the review of the current job classifications.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Employment Relations Advisory Board will then meet and make recommendations to the Minister, and the final decision, of course, will be made, together in consultation with the Ministry of Finance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since the Coalition Government took office, the work to review the National Minimum Wage and the 10 Wage Regulations had been part of our commitment from day one. The Ministry will ensure that the due processes are adhered to for a fair and just minimum wage that will benefit all Fijians and the national economy as a whole.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, could the honourable Minister elaborate on the specific factors and considerations that are being taken into account in the review of the National Minimum Wage?

The reason why I am asking this is because in the recent weeks, the honourable Minister of Finance was in Labasa. There were concerns raised by the employers about the \$6. I would also like to know whether \$6 is in place, is it being reviewed, is it from the Union or from is it the Government?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have stated very clearly

MR. SPEAKER.- I thought he was only passing a statement. I never heard him, or have you changed it to a question now?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I got his question. I can read his body language as well.

As I have stated earlier, the process is ongoing now. Consultations are taking place. Submissions are being made by various stakeholders. The Fiji Trades Union Congress has made a statement that they would like the minimum wage to be \$6, others have made other submissions. Once all the submissions are considered by the consultants, then the review process will take place from there. Nothing has been determined, that is what I want to advise.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, is there any timeline for this process, or is it going to take a year or something?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, we have earlier stated that the review will be completed and an announcement will be made during the National Budget.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my concern is for the small and medium enterprises. What measures are being taken by the Coalition Government to consider mitigating the impacts of the increase of minimum wages for the small businesses?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, once again, at the expense of repetition, let me state in this august Parliament that consultations are in progress, and SMEs are also being consulted. No stakeholder is being left out. So, all submissions will be considered and then a recommendation will be made by this group of consultants.

MR. SPEAKER.- On housekeeping, for the purposes of complying with Standing Orders in respect to sitting times, I now call upon the Leader of the Government in Parliament to move a suspension motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

Under Standing Order 6, that so much of Standing Order 23(1) is suspended so as to allow Parliament to sit beyond 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 still have a few items to go through, including the Written Questions, Schedule 2 and Motions for Debate.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

QUESTIONS

Preservation of Levuka's Historical Monuments (Question No. 72/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts update Parliament on the work that has been undertaken during this financial year to preserve historical monuments in Levuka?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Kumar for the question. Earlier this year, we visited Levuka. We have looked at the heritage areas. We have a good discussions with stakeholders there in Levuka and from that discussions, we have formed a committee to review and have a look at the heritage sites.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from this year's operational budget of \$19,000 and the rollover from 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 was \$1.5 million which happens to renovate the Levuka Community Centre. From the brief that was given to me yesterday, it should be completed by the end of this month. Unfortunately, the funds is not enough to fully equip the Centre and we might need additional funds for that.

Regarding the Deed of Cession site, the first phase was supposed to be fencing and walkway and the second one was supposed to be the walls and the drainage, we decided to change it around, so do the walls and drainage first so that the foundation is compact before we carry out the fencing and the walkway. They have already got quotations for contractors. We have provided Levuka Town Councils \$50,000 that we supposed to provide.

The Committee has also reviewed the reports that was done after *TC Winston*. They have just picked those who urgently need the repair. Those ones will try and propose it for next year's budget for funding.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I thank the honourable Minister for his response. My only concern at this stage is that the honourable Minister has not been briefed very well. That is why, perhaps, we are not able to carry on with the work because, again, you are forming

a committee, discussions and we are not able to use the money allocated for the year.

This work had already started with the Heritage Architect. We have only one heritage architect - Setoki is his name and I have forgotten the company, and he had already planned all the heritage sites and what needs to be done. One had to use this \$150,000 to continue with one activity at a time to complete that. So, I just wanted to brief the honourable Minister so that he can pick it up from there and move on with the heritage works that we started. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- She is just briefing you, Sir, so we will rest it there.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, when UNESCO actually declares a particular site as a World Heritage Site, one of the conditions attached to it is that you must have a buffer zone. So, in your work that you are currently doing, honourable Minister, are you also ensuring because what it is, is these sites are outstanding universal value. That is why we have these buffer zones. My question really is, when you do this particular work, are you also ensuring that the buffer zone is protected and looked after so that we are in compliance with the UNESCO requirements? Because these things, if not done, we may lose the status of World Heritage Listing.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reports that I received from the new team, they have highlighted the issue about the buffer zone that needs to be addressed. I have been briefed on that one.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Forgive me for my ignorance on this issue, honourable Minister, but is the old Levuka Hospital part of the heritage? Because it is an eyesore and this has been raised continuously by the Lomaiviti Provincial Council, especially the *Mata ni Tikina* from Levuka Vakaviti. So, what is the plan about the Levuka Hospital, please?

HON. I. VASU.- Yes, it is under the heritage site. In our discussions yesterday, I have directed the Board for National Trust to have a look at the buildings there at the hospital. Those that cannot be repaired, if they can recommend that for condemnation so that they can write to Levuka Town Council and advise them that those buildings, you cannot do any more thing about it when I looked at it. It is just an eyesore, you are correct. We just have to condemn then we clear it. If they need to build another building there, then they have to follow the structure that is out there, that should be followed and be in line with the heritage recommendations.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Minister. Being a military engineer, he knows his area of the woods very well.

Fiji Volunteer Service & School Employment Exposure Programme
(Question No. 73/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations update Parliament on the Fiji Volunteer Service established under the National Employment Centre Act 2009 and the joint School Employment Exposure Programme (SEEP)?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the honourable Assistant Minister for the question. The Volunteer Service was established under Part 10 of the National Employment Centre Act 2009, to promote a strong sense of service and civic pride amongst the people of the Fiji Islands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, volunteering is considered one of the best and productive means or forms of personal and professional development, richly adding value to society in the most cost-effective and caring ways through contribution of effort, skills and time in charitable ventures and humanitarian assistance to the less fortunate people in society.

Only yesterday, Mr. Speaker, Sir, did we hear from the honourable Minister for Youth and Sports regarding the various activities our youth are going to get into. We have in the past, had our Boys Scouts, Girl Guides, St. Johns, and so many others, Duke of Edinburgh, all these were very good training and development programmes for our youth. Somewhere along the line, we kind of lost them, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

So, it has now additionally become a means of training and entry into the job market of our new graduates as well. Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the scheme, last year a total of 111 graduate volunteers were engaged with the local employers, including Government Ministries. For the current financial year, a total of 122 graduate employees are engaged.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry also reviewed the volunteer allowance from the previous \$120 per week. As an incentive to support volunteerism where graduate volunteers are now paid a weekly allowance of \$180. And out of this, 50 percent or \$90 is paid by the host employer and the balance is paid by the Ministry. So that is for graduates or those who are degree holders.

Our attachment for certificate levels and diploma levels are now paid \$150 per week compared to the previous \$100 per week where 50 percent again is paid by the host employer and the other 50 percent paid by the Ministry. A large number of employers are able to benefit from this and it is mutual where new graduates are able to acquire training attachments and at the end of that there are those that are actually employed fulltime by the same employer and the period is between three to six months.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other scheme is the Student Employment Exposure Programme (SEEP). It is spearheaded through smooth transition of students from schools into the world of work, into decent jobs and employment growth, based on students' subject combination, skills and potentials in line with their interests.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the SEEP programme was initially launched in November 2018 in the Central Division before it was launched in the West and later in the North in 2019. This Programme was later shelved following the onset of COVID in 2020.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the whole practical exercise is an early intervention for students to experience work readiness and to help students nurture their employability skills needed in any work environment. This is highlighted in the National Employment Policy - Policy Priority Number One: to create more opportunities for young people aged 15 years to 24 years to follow clear pathways from education to employment.

The objective is for education and training providers to have a closer link with employers, and I firmly believe that the SEEP programme will go a long way towards fulfilling the policy priority. The opportunity will provide hands-on experience in the world of work and allow students the opportunity to make decisions on their career pathways.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a total of 28 secondary schools in the Central Division participated in this year's programme, with a total of 163 Year 11 students. For the first time, we have schools from rural areas, including Waidina Secondary School and Wainimala Secondary School from the Province of Naitasiri and Nuku Secondary School from the Province of Serua. These students, Sir,

were hosted by 12 private organisations and eight Government Ministries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for schools in the Central Division that missed out, my Ministry intends to continue this collaboration in the next school holiday with other schools in the West before moving to the North. When these students are attached to these workplaces, they are paid a small pocket allowance of \$20 a day and their bus fares are taken care of by the Ministry of Education through the topping up their cards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must acknowledge our partners from the Ministry of Education, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation (FCEF) for this collaboration, which could bridge the gaps between the education system and our world of work.

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, Sir, can the honourable Minister brief and share with this august Parliament what was the response and the feedback on the shift from schools that participated - the students and the employers that engaged them during the two weeks holiday?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, and again I wish to thank the honourable Member for the question. The feedback that we have received from the Ministry of Education and other social partners including the ILO and Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation has been overwhelming with positive feedback. My team has been inundated with queries on why other schools missed out and when will be the next round.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the feedback from our team, students participated have actually shown remarkable adaptability and enthusiasm diving into the new work environment, for instance, we had science students from various schools who initially were apprehensive about working in non-science settings such as administrative office or retail outlets. However, once immersed in the environment, very quickly they adapted and showcased their soft skills such as communication, teamwork and problem-solving.

Similarly, students with backgrounds in agriculture surprised us with their versatility and willingness to learn the embraced opportunities to work in the diverse sectors including hospitality and customer service where they effectively apply their knowledge and sustainable practices and agriculture practices to their roles. For example, we had students from agricultural background excelled in roles that require them to educate customers about organic produce or assist in garden maintenance at resorts. There are numerous other examples of that nature, Sir.

In the BPO sector, it is an evolving industry and has been particularly encouraging. The company has provided the students with exposure to a dynamic and technology-driven work environment. Despite being unfamiliar with the industry, students quickly adapted to tasks such as data entry, customer support and digital marketing. Their eagerness to learn and adapt to newer technologies impressed employers demonstrating their potential to excel in this emerging industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in summary, the SEEP initiative has provided the students with valuable opportunity to develop and showcase their soft skills regardless of their academic backgrounds. Their involvement in diverse industries highlight their adaptability and readiness to embrace new challenges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, feedback from employers that hosted them during the school holidays praised these students for their dedication and I must acknowledge all the organisations, including Government Ministries that hosted these students. Employers were excited about the programme

and look forward to assisting students in engaging them in the upcoming holidays. They were also to pay students additional allowances as part of the two-week performance assessment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now, this programme, as I have stated earlier, is going to be an ongoing one because of the success that we have noted.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for his explanation of the National Volunteer Service. I was listening and I hear that the volunteers are continuing to do their diplomas, people with diplomas and degrees. I am just wondering about those that do not rise to that level of qualification. There are a lot of people who do certificates in trade, people do in dance and other things like music. Is there any thought from the Ministry to grow this volunteer service not just for the people?

I think a lot of people who do straight office type jobs. They are the ones who do the diplomas and degrees, and they are getting into the service but is there any thought about those others who do not have the opportunity to do diplomas and degrees. They attend a lot of these schools around the place, some of them are registered under the Fiji Higher Education Commission. Is there any scope to also give these people the opportunity under the Fiji Volunteer Scheme.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Member for the question. I may have missed, my apology. The Certificate holders are included with the Diploma holders. The others is food for thought that we could take into consideration. Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before, I offer the floor to the honourable Leader of the Opposition, I thank you for your replies honourable Minister. But I detect that there are some similarities in the way supplementary questions are being raised, I mean, the questions and the answers. It is beginning to look like what was displayed by the honourable Minister for Fisheries and honourable Ratu Niudamu because when he read out his reply to the supplementary question which is just to elucidate, he went on to about three or four pages. Yes, just a comment on that.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a quick question to the honourable Minister on the Fiji Volunteer Service. I know that when this was established, there was a National Register. Then for those who are not particularly close to the main centres, they had problems in getting registered in the National Register. Has that changed?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for the question. All the officers of the Ministry nationwide are able to register. So they can go to any of our offices and register and we are now digitising the whole process to be able to get them to register online as well.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- I really thank the honourable Minister for this Voluntary Programme and it is crucial that the programme is thoroughly evaluated, to ensure that it delivers the practical benefit without compromising the overall learning experience. My question to the honourable Minister; since you said that it is going to be ongoing, do you get them to register into the Voluntary FNPF Scheme?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Member for that question or more like a suggestion, that initiative is now under discussion, Sir.

Written QuestionsCapital Projects for 2023-2024 Financial Year
(Question No. 74/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics inform Parliament on -

- (a) A list of all commenced and continuing Capital Projects for the financial year 2023 – 2024; and
- (b) Indicate the status, that is, whether they are completed and/or still work in progress.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will table my response at a later sitting day as permitted under Standing Order 45(3).

Village Beautification and Improvement Fund Scheme
(Question No. 75/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts update Parliament on the number of villages and settlements that have utilised the Village Beautification and Improvement Fund Scheme?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will table my response at a later date.

Update on Rural Water Projects
(Question No. 76/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport inform Parliament on the list of all rural water projects that were scheduled to be undertaken by the Water Authority of Fiji and the Public Works Department in this financial year 2023 – 2024 and to include the following information:

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

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU (Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport).- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will table my response at a later sitting date as permitted. I would like to raise my concern raising a Point of Order in the Standing Order on maintaining the decorum of Parliament, as they continue to undermine, because we are permitted under Standing Order 45(3). The way we are going, it is like criminal not to provide the answer.

(Laughter)

Please refrain, and in any case, some of the questions are asking about the budget which we have not even completed spending. I will provide it, as permitted under Standing Order 45(3).

CONVENTION ON CYBERCRIME

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move that for the purposes of Section 51 of the Constitution and pursuant to Standing Order 130(4):

That Parliament approves the Convention on Cybercrime (Budapest Convention).

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence tabled its report on the review of the Convention on 14th July, 2023, noting full support for Fiji to accede to the Convention. As a matter of background, the Convention of Cybercrime, also known as the Budapest Convention, was tabled in this august Parliament on 1st September, 2022.

Given that Parliament dissolved in October that year, the work on the report could not progress. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence and all those involved in the process. We assure the work was progressed with further tremendous work, and finalising and tabling of the report on the review of the Budapest Convention.

The use of cybercrime is no longer an emerging issue, but rather it is one of the ways in which criminal offences are committed. It is evident that technology advances at a rapid rate. Online platforms and e-transactions are norm of the society, with daily communication and the provision of services. This extends to matter before the courts and our laws. It is in this light that being part of a bigger network becomes essential a country like Fiji with our limited resources and expertise.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Cybercrime Act 2021 was enacted in February 2021, but for one section, commenced on 14th November 2022. Prior to this, the Crimes Act 2009 was the only law that dealt with computer offences, the provision of which was no longer sufficient to accommodate the evolving the nature of computer offences and computer related offence committed worldwide.

Cybercrime offence are transboundary offences. By this, I mean that with the use of a technology or computer system an individual may be able to hack into a computer system that is in another country and causes the serious inclusion across jurisdictions.

Cybercrime offence in fact are now in strategically part of the other traditional transboundary offences such as trafficking of persons and of illicit drugs, to name a few.

I would like to provide in this august Parliament the type of offences that is currently been dealt by the Fiji Police Force:

- Complaint on dishonest obtaining or dealing in personal financial information;
- Unauthorised modification or restricted data held in computer;
- Traffic in obscene publications; and
- Phonography activities or explicit presentation of sexual activity in images or in writing involve a juveniles posting an intimate visual recording and closing up by posting electronic communication.

We see here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the nature of the offences now and what we can anticipate in the future. What is alarming is the need to educate and advocate for sensible online behaviour and practices. This is not purely a matter for criminal law. In this one that requires everyone's effort in combating cyber and related offences.

We can start, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by being part of a bigger network of countries whose progress is based upon actual ex-prisoners and assistance received from bigger pool of expertise and resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Article 39 of the Convention provides for the purpose of present Convention is to supplement applicable multilateral and bilateral treaties or arrangement as between the parties, including the provision of:

- European Convention on Extradition;
- European Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal matters; and
- The additional Protocol to the European Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters.

The Convention, Mr. Speaker, Sir, provides for a substantive criminal offences, procedural measures and international corporation provision requires for its member States to domesticate. To become a member of a Convention entails the following advantages for Fiji has highlighted in the Report:

1. Convention provides a legal framework for cyber offences.
2. It creates a harmonised effect on similar offences across member State jurisdiction.

Chapter 2 of the Convention in particular provides general and specific provisions for International Corporation amongst members States. Not only with respect to Cybercrime offences and again by means of computer but with respect to crime involving electronic devices.

Partisan Convention engaged with each other in trusted and efficient corporation which will benefit Smaller Island Developing States (SIDS) like Fiji in terms of capacity building and international engagement.

3. It promotes effective and efficient communication, detection, investigation and prosecution of perpetrators of cyber related offences both nationally and internationally.
4. It promotes corporation between the private sector and criminal justice authorities for members of the Convention. It gives that member the need to have a domestic legal framework on Cybercrime and electronic evidence in place.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have mentioned the Cybercrime Act 2021 commenced on the 14th November, 2022.

Another, it provide access to capacity building programmes, technical assistance is necessary to facilitate a full implementation of the Convention and to enhance the ability to corporate internationally.

Fiji as a member State we also participate in the negotiation of future instruments and for the evolution of the Convention.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Article 37 of the Convention, provides *inter alia* that in respect of any State acceding to the Convention, that Convention antic to force on the first day of the month following the expiration for a period of three months after the date of deposit of the instrument accession with the Secretary General of the Council of Europe.

Subject to Parliamentary approval, proper steps will be taken to ensure the instrument of accession will be deposited in accordance with the requirements of the Constitution.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have come a long way in our preparation, advocacy and awareness measures particularly with the line Ministry, the Ministry of Communication to reach this stage we can assess for our cybercrime offenses need to be tackled with the proper understanding, framework, planning and resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is ready. It is recommended that Fiji accedes to the Convention on Cybercrime, and I strongly urge Members of Parliament to support the motion. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion and before I offer the floor, I have a list of speakers from the Whips. The batting will be led off by:

1. Honourable Premila Kumar;
2. Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications;
3. Honourable Faiyaz Koya;
4. Honourable Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs;
5. Honourable Viliame Naupoto; and rounded off by
6. Honourable Assistant Minister for Rural and Maritime Development, and Disaster Management.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion that Fiji accedes to the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime, and I thank the Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defense for guiding Parliament with their very comprehensive Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our lives revolve around computers, laptops, smartphones and many other technologies that are available in the market. We spend more time online in our social and professional world. We shop, work, bank, conduct financial transactions, play, and access various services that are available online.

Governments around the world are also moving their services online for convenience and efficiency. We have seen nations moving towards cashless society. With such convenience, Mr. Speaker, Sir, comes the increasing threat of cybercrime to consumers, businesses, and even governments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the beginning of 2023, 87.7 percent of Fiji's population were active online users, 59 percent of Fiji's population are social media users, and 1.28 million mobile connections are active online. These numbers must have increased by now because we are in 2024, and the mobile user number if you look at it, it is more than our population, so it is quite big. That means people have smart phone in the palm of their hand and they can use this anytime anywhere, to conduct any financial transaction, or to do anything they want to with that phone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is no wonder that so many people are affected by cybercrimes, causing consumers and business owners immense financial, emotional distress, and psychological harm. Fiji, like many other developing countries, is vulnerable to cyber-attacks, and harmful online activities such as cyberbullying, online shouting, harassment, stalking, as well as the use of internet for criminal activities such as romance scams, and financial and investment scams, to name a few.

Now, according to the Global State of Scams Report 2023, because scam is so common in Fiji, the financial loss due to scams amounts to a staggering \$1 trillion, equivalent to 1 percent of the global GDP and only 7 percent of the victims recover their lost funds, that is what I want to emphasize. Only 7 percent are able to recover their funds, that means all other money goes into the

into the hands of criminals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no one is immune to online crimes, and we are well versed with the most recent eBay scam in Fiji, costing unsuspecting consumers more than \$3.6 million. The recovery of lost fund remains a problem for Fiji Consumers, just like what we have seen globally, and equally disappointing is the pace at which perpetrators are punished for swindling Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have assisted many victims of cybercrime in my previous role as the CEO of the Consumer Council. I have seen helpless victims knocking on the doors of agencies for assistance to recover their lost fund, and even those victims who were used as money-mule in money laundering activities. At that time, Fiji had no mechanism in place to assist the victims. We were at the mercy of the banks, asking the banks if they can assist, but there was no other way to help the victims.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a fact that the economic cost of cybercrime is huge. Cybercrime makes more money when compared to the national economy. It is estimated that cybercrime will make around \$10 trillion by 2025. No wonder a single nation cannot fight the crime in isolation!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the rise in cybercrime is an issue that knows no borders and spares no nation. We need a collective effort to fight this crime. It is for this reason that we must ratify the Budapest Convention for international cooperation. All big mighty companies, such as Facebook, You Tube, Instagram, Tik Tok, you name it, are all housed in America. For a small country like ours, it will be difficult to collect electronic evidence without this global co-operation. It is a bitter truth that much of our critical data and infrastructure resides in private hands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, embracing an international framework, like the Budapest Convention, not only strengthens our cybersecurity capabilities but also integrates us into a global network dedicated to combating cybercrimes. The FijiFirst Government has put in place several measures to combat cybercrime, for example, the Online Safety Act 2018 and Cybercrime Act 2021. So, Fiji is already ahead, even without acceding to Budapest Convention. Ratifying this Convention will only help Fiji improve its current legislation to international standards, if it is not already done.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the benefits of ratifying the Budapest Convention open the door to capacity building initiative. It will equip our law enforcement agencies with technical expertise and tools for investigation and prosecution, and Fiji can be part of evidence-sharing mechanism. Being a party to this Convention will also give access to a global network of experts to ensure justice is swift and certain.

We have heard from honourable Kamikamica this morning about connecting the unconnected and giving our people equal opportunity to access digital space. The more people come online, the crime becomes bigger and bigger and with the amount of money criminals collect, they become more smarter, and they can invest in more tools to counteract what the countries try and put to protect its people. So, this is the fight between most powerful people, whether it is the technology providers or the criminals, against a country with only limited amount of funds.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budapest Convention will definitely create a safer and more secure digital space for consumers and businesses, therefore, I recommend and support the motion before Parliament, and I sincerely hope that we are able to move on with this Convention very quickly. There has been a huge delay, it was quite disappointing. The honourable Attorney-General has been talking about efficiency, Sir, and I hope he should have been more efficient for this particular convention because it is so much needed right now.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.-Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in full support of the motion tabled by the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Justice, that Parliament approves the Fiji's accession to the Convention on Cybercrime, or most commonly referred to as the Budapest Convention.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, bolstering cyber-security posture, including combating cybercrime, is paramount as we move into a more integrated digital economy. In order to effectively do this, enhancing global cooperation is needed and the Convention on Cybercrime plays a tangible role in addressing the complexities of cybercrime and electronic evidence, a domain that knows no borders in reach and impact.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Convention applies to any crime committed via the internet and any other computer network, dealing particularly with infringement of copyrights, computer-related fraud, child pornography and violations of network security. Any crime that has electronic evidence, Mr. Speaker, Sir, be it a text message, email, CCTV footage, audio, IP Address or call log, can benefit from the SWIFT International Corporation provisions of the Budapest Convention.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Parliament's endorsement of the Fiji accession to the Budapest Convention further signifies our global commitment to ensuring a safe and secure cyberspace for our people. Sir, I would like to share some statistics on the cyber threat landscape which demonstrates why this motion needs to be supported by all honourable Members in this Parliament.

The Pacific Security Outlook Report 2023-2024 highlighted that the activity of cybercriminals and State-sponsored threat actors have increased globally, and the direct and indirect targeting of Pacific individuals, businesses, e-commerce systems and government systems remain a threat. It mentions the three most important cyber threats in the region were phishing, ransomware and malware attacks.

The earlier edition of the Report of 2022-2023 provide examples of the increased of cyber-attacks in the region, namely, in one of the region's largest ever cyber-attacks. Papua New Guinea's Ministry of Finance Government pay system was targeted by ransomware of cyberattack in October 2021. Criminals attacked the Department of Finance's Integrated Financial Management System, seeking a payment in bitcoin for restoration of services.

In 2021, Australia was affected by ransomware attack on a critical emergency, surgical and other healthcare services. In March 2022, the Republic of the Marshall Islands' National Telecommunications Authority experienced major distributed denial of services cyber-attack that disrupted internet for about 10 days. Furthermore, the World Economic Forum, in its Global Risks Report 2024 stated, that out of the 10 risks within a two-year projection, cyber insecurity is the number four global threat.

Microsoft estimates that the global impact of cyberattacks is predicted to reach over \$10 billion per annum by next year. These are further exacerbated by the shortage of the necessary workforce. This is the reality that we are facing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but it is not bleak, if we work together.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are putting together the necessary foundational elements and working closely with the many stakeholders to ensure that we are in a position to combat these new and emerging threats. This cannot be handled alone by one Ministry, it cannot be handled alone by the Government, it requires all of us.

Within Government we are strengthening areas of collaboration between Ministries and partner agencies and ensuring that we are building capacity amongst relevant stakeholders. This is to ensure that we are not duplicating work, and we are streamlining and leveraging existing regional and global efforts. All of these adds up to the many layers of protection and resilience that we need, to ensure a more sustainable digital economy.

I would now like to turn briefly to outline our efforts in preparing to accede to and become a party to the Budapest Convention. We have partnered with the Council of Europe in this journey, from our Cybersecurity Crime Act that is aligned to the Budapest Convention, to enhancing capacity of our criminal justice authorities and partners on electronic evidence and fostering collaboration on the 24/7 Network.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as an observer, Fiji joins the 72 Parties to the Convention, the 20 Observer countries and other like-minded countries in harmonising our laws, to ensure prompt and efficient international cooperation to criminalise and prosecute cyber offences. One key action item for Fiji is the designation of the 24/7 Network POC. We have been focusing our efforts on ensuring that this is done properly.

With the support of the Council of Europe, we have been holding numerous interagency sessions to deepen our understanding on the 24/7 Network POC, and in order to collectively identify the competent national 24/7 Network POC, which is a requirement of the Budapest Convention and the Cybercrime Act. The interagency 24/7 Network POC stakeholders included the:

1. Ministry of Foreign Affairs;
2. Office of the Attorney-General;
3. Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration;
4. Fiji Police Force;
5. Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions;
6. Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption;
7. Fiji Intelligence Unit; and
8. Ministry of Communications.

As a result of the 24/7 Network POC sessions with other countries and better understanding the models that they were using and operating, this has enabled the Interagency Committee to be able to collectively identify which agencies are best equipped to become part of the network. The POC is to provide immediate assistance for the purpose of investigations of cybercrimes or the collection of electronic evidence of cybercrime for any of the Budapest Convention Signatory States and is the focal point to request for the same type of assistance from any of our Budapest Convention State members.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the tangible benefit of being part of the 24/7 Network was shared by one of the member countries where previously, it would take three months to process a request from a different country to preserve electronic evidence through the usual diplomatic process. Under the 24/7 Network, the timeline was shortened to five days for a similar request. This was due to the immediate response afforded under the 24/7 Network.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this will give much needed boost to the capabilities of our law enforcement and prosecution agencies and, therefore, similar to other State members to the Convention, our 24/7 Network POC will be the Fiji Police Force and the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions. We are finalising this legal designation with the Office of the Attorney-General.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had earlier referred to the work that is being done to build capacity across our different agencies. The Government has facilitated dedicated capacity, building workshops for criminal justice authorities, including the judiciary, prosecution, law enforcement and policy agencies, as we continue to prioritise these efforts. We are building capacities that are sustainable, such as the Train the Trainer initiatives in the design and development of electronic evidence curriculum for the first responders, such as our Police Officers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, additional dedicated workshops, sessions and conferences are being planned for the prosecution, judiciary, law enforcement and the Ministries, according to their identified priorities. These will be done under the Council of Europe's capacity building programme, known as Global Action on Cybercrime Extended (GLACY-e) initiative, whereby Fiji as an observer, is the only Pacific recipient to benefit from this initiative.

We are already seeing this cooperation in action with electronic evidence workshops for the Fiji Police Force Officials, that was successfully conducted earlier this year. Next month, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions will be convening a national conference on cybercrime and e-evidence for prosecutors, which is also being supported under the GLACY-e programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for capacity building, it is not necessarily about the number of workshops or seminars that are organised. It is about providing the appropriate resources to the right agency that has the expertise and mandate to carry out a task successfully, and that is the focus of our international partnerships. For example, in December 2023, in partnership with the World Bank and the Korean Internet and Security Agency, the Ministry organised a workshop which was attended by the Ministry of Home Affairs on bolstering our cybersecurity efforts for critical information and infrastructure, including Government infrastructure. We have also closed the tender for the holistic review of the Department of ITC Services that will work with partners to bolster the capabilities of the agency that looks after Government networks and systems.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is an active contributor to the ICT regional and international forums, notwithstanding our constrained resources and we have seen the value in progressing our national and common priorities, which ultimately shapes ICT development. Last year, alongside my fellow ICT Ministers, we convened to discuss the common challenges and opportunities that existed. This resulted in the signing of the *Lagatoi Declaration*, which outlined six priorities, including cybersecurity. This builds on the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent and the 2018 Boe Declaration. Fiji also hosted the Inaugural Pacific Cyber Security Capacity Building and Coordination Conference last October that provided a platform for the region to discuss the status and roadmap for cybersecurity capacity building.

Mr. Speaker, as you can recall, as mentioned by the honourable Prime Minister, the highlight as well of our efforts was the signing of the MOU between the honourable Prime Minister and the Prime Minister of Australia on cybersecurity. This demonstrates the priority that Government attaches to this, with the laser focus on bolstering cybersecurity through a dedicated strategy of policies, human resourcing, national search co-operation and online safety efforts. The Ambassador for Cyber Affairs and Critical Technology has already commenced discussions on an implementation plan.

Mr. Speaker, Fiji is also actively participating at the United Nations Open Ended Working Group in the development of ICT in the context of international security, or commonly known as the OEWG, which is the only UN forum on cybersecurity and norms of responsible state behaviour in the cyberspace.

Mr. Speaker, our longstanding partner, the Council of Europe, is standing ready to provide further workshops and awareness sessions, including our legislature. It is important that as Members of Parliament, we are briefed on how the Convention functions with the evolving threat landscape and the malicious use of technology.

The short answer is that, approximately 23 years since the Convention was opened for signature, the Budapest Convention is still the only international treaty on this topic, and it is still applicable as it was drafted to be technology-neutral and there are guidance notes for member States that are released to address evolving threats, such as ransomware and malware. There are also two new Protocols to the Convention. Fiji can explore these Protocols, once we have acceded to the Budapest Convention.

I urge all honourable Members to support this motion in recognising the Budapest Convention as it is pivotal in safeguarding our nation and the region against evolving threats. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, I want to take this opportunity to say ‘thank you’ to the Committee for a very comprehensive Report that has been put before us. This Report coming to us has been long overdue, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee have recommended that we ratify the Convention without reservations. Of course, it has our support in making sure that this is done. I had mentioned earlier this morning, Sir, that in Fiji, we are in a particular position in the region where we are one of the most developed economies in the Pacific in terms of ICT and ICT infrastructure, and we spoke about it this morning. We actually have a global ranking, and we are placed 107 out of 176 odd nations in ICT Development Index.

Now, what that effectively means is that it puts us in a different space, Mr. Speaker, Sir. When I say different space, it is not actually just a good space, it is also the space that needs nurturing, it means looking after, et cetera, and this helps us in terms of cybersecurity. As I have said earlier on this morning, Sir, the studies along the region have said that by doing all of these, by having more increased connectivity, et cetera, we are also at risk in terms of cybersecurity and the region is also at risk, and the potential to cause a lot of harm whether it is financial or unauthorized access to banking, et cetera, as well as harm to the wellbeing of our citizens.

There are few things that need to be spelt out and I think in the Report, you will see that the Fiji Financial Intelligence Unit (FFIU) has actually reported that some \$90,000 was lost due to cybercrime and this is where Fijians were sending money across to, I think, somewhere in Africa. So, it has a big bearing on us, Sir, it is very important for us to ratify this particular Convention. What it does also, it provides a legal framework for international cooperation for us and in terms of cybercrime and electronic evidence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just wanted to relay (it is actually in the Report, it is good to read this, and everyone should read this) the experience that they had in Tonga. Tonga adopted its Computer Crimes Act 2019 and it covered all of the provisions in the Budapest Convention. Tonga requested accession to the Budapest Convention in 2017 and then it became a party, so they beat us to it. But following the request, Sir, Tonga immediately became a priority country for the Global Action on Cybercrime (GLACY) and it extended to Global Action on Cybercrime Extended (GLACY +) Project, a joint project with the European Union. So, you can see the benefits that can be derived out of us acceding to this particular Convention.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a whole host of recommendations that have been given by the Committee. The kind of cybercrimes and we are all aware of it, but I think we need reminding, is in terms of ATM scheming that is happening, email spoofing, business emails being compromised, et cetera, that is now a part of the landscape of ICT. So, we have to deal with it so by adhering to and actually acceding to the actual Convention, we are doing something that is good for all Fijians. The figure that I was talking about earlier with respect to people sending money to Benin in Africa is \$98,658 lost because of cybercrime.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think the honourable Deputy Prime and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications has also mentioned about PIFS being very supportive and I think the Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent and the Declaration also recognise the challenges that have been posed by this. This is phenomenal for the security of our people, Sir, and it is a critical infrastructure, it is also a protection of data and information.

In terms of international convention, Mr. Speaker, Sir, ratifying this Convention can only enhance Fiji's ability to combat cybercrime through international cooperation. It actually could lead to more effective prevention and of actual prosecution of cybercrime. I will just speak on the prosecution part in just a few minutes, Sir, but it also helps us in terms of capacity building. It actually could provide access for technical assistance and training programmes and strengthening our response to cybercrime. It will actually provide the comprehensive legal framework for international cooperation on cybercrime.

We will also need to ensure that our domestic laws and amendments are in place and ratification may require some amendments to take place, and I think the Office of the Attorney-General will give very wise and are probably on to it already, in terms of the Cybercrime Act and also juveniles, et cetera.

The implications of these amendments can be farfetched and have very long tentacles, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We have to really, really think about how we do it. And in doing these legislations, we have the ability to access our development partners in terms of how it can be done best for a better future for all Fijians.

The resource allocation also, honourable Minister of Finance, in the next Budget, maybe we need to start looking into this also as more resources will be needed by the Ministry to ensure that we are compliant also.

In terms of education, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think this is an area that we probably also need to ensure that there is a whole lot more public awareness. Awareness is important, everyone is savvy in terms of being able to use these things and I am going to say something that maybe is not very parliamentary, but when it actually goes all wonky and of order, no one knows what to do and how to get that justice again. So, it requires education at all levels and that very ICT network that we have can be used to ensure that we make sure that we educate all parts of our population, whether it is in the rural area or not, or it is actually in city-based places.

Public awareness, as I have said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, campaigns need to happen. We have phenomenal billboards around Fiji, and these are great ways to actually make public aware, and we have changing billboards, et cetera, that happen.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of gender-based violence, we have been speaking about it, there is a lot that actually happens, and I think Fiji also needs to pay heed and also pay attention to the fact that there is another convention - the Istanbul Convention, that deals with women, children and girls, et cetera, and this offers additional protections online for them. It is something that we probably need

to fast-track, honourable Attorney General, and bring to the fore and see if we could actually accede that also.

There are emerging developments happening on a daily basis with respect to this particular area, there is a new UN Convention actually coming forth soon, and I understand the benefits of this Convention should be considered alongside the actual Convention that we are signing.

I just want to explain a little bit about the Istanbul Convention, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It prevents violence, protects victims and it also ends the impunity of perpetrators, especially when it comes to women, and it is a form of violation of human rights, et cetera. Now this is something very important that we need to look at and this probably needs to go hand in hand in terms of us ratifying this particular Convention. I think on 28th June, 2023, the European Union ratified the Istanbul Convention so it is something that we need to look at.

All in all, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think it is a good thing that we are doing. I think the recommendations that have come through from the Committee are very, very important and I think everyone should make sure that they read the recommendations. Most of all, Sir, I think that what they have actually pointed out with respect to the recommendations is that the budgetary resources need to be allocated in trainings, advocacy, and they have spoken about the national laws, they have spoken about the roles and responsibility of the existing laws and they have also mentioned that we should anticipate the release of a new United Nations Convention on Counting the Use of Information and Communications Technologies for Criminal Purposes.

These are very important recommendations, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I think Parliament should be very aware of what these are and make sure they read up on it because it is important to us and I think this ratification will put us in a better space. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the time and I fully support it, Sir.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also rise in support of the motion that is before Parliament and I want to say ‘thank you’, on behalf of those of us in the Committee, to all the speakers who have spoken before me. I know that honourable Koya has pretty much covered the Report, but I also want to make mention that Fiji, like many developing nations, is confronted with an ever-evolving cyber landscape and we no longer function in isolation.

I also want to mention, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the extreme effects of global cyber threats and attacks on critical infrastructure, including e-government infrastructure, becoming a party to this Convention will enhance Fiji’s ability to combat cybercrime, as we have all heard today with the international support and assistance from the base where this Convention is deposited. This, especially, is in relation to continued capacity building to better equip Fiji’s criminal justice system, including the Judiciary, Prosecution and Law Enforcement Agencies.

Undoubtedly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime is the most comprehensive and coherent international agreement on cybercrime and electronic evidence to-date. Just going to the Report from the Committee on page 15, I also want to repeat something that honourable Koya mentioned that acceding to the Convention is not just in Fiji’s interest, but it is in the region’s interest also and some honourable Members may not realise that from the region, Australia and Tonga have acceded to the Convention already, while New Zealand and Vanuatu have been invited to accede, as Fiji has done.

The Committee has strongly recommended that Fiji ratifies the Convention without reservation, but I also wanted to note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that apart from the main recommendations, there are other recommendations in the Report that need consideration. And one of the many

recommendations is for Fiji to consider other Conventions, as honourable Koya has mentioned, the Istanbul Convention to work hand in hand with the Budapest Convention because of the recognition of online gender-based violence, being a violation of a woman's human right. So, the Budapest Convention will, indeed, help Fiji become a harder target for cybercrime and cyber criminals, and I have no reservation in recommending this motion before us.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first of all, at the outset, I thank the Government through the honourable Attorney-General, for bringing this back to Parliament for approval. It closes the loop in the process of treaties.

This Treaty has come a long way. It started by the previous Government - the FijiFirst Government, in a different parliamentary term also and then it came to this Parliament under the new Government. I understand the length it took, given that this Convention fell on to your lap and you have taken it on. You have allocated this to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, we have come back, and the loop is now closed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are creating a little bit of history, in a sense that this is the first Treaty in this Parliament sitting that we have dealt with. Normally, according to the Standing Orders, we learn on how we do this, as we go forward, if there are further treaties that will come.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know a lot has been said by my colleagues that have spoken before, but there is no doubt that the cyber space/cyber domain where cyber criminals operate is man-made construct. The more we connect, the more space we give for people to be able to commit those crimes through the cyberspace.

If I may quote you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when you spoke to us during that workshop in Nadi in May on the Regional Pacific Islands Parliamentary Workshop on Cyber Crime, you told us, and I quote; "Our vulnerability to cybercrime increases as we continually move towards new online technologies and services." You added that, "This is good, but it also comes with risks". And if you connect your statement to what the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, the very noble move to connect those that are unconnected is good for our people and apply what you have said, it means that we should not lose sight of the fact that as we connect, we extend the space and reach for criminals to commit cybercrime.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, cyberspace dominates an influence, as mentioned by honourable Premila Kumar, and some of our speakers who have spoken before, from home, to schools, workplaces, and it is also on a much bigger scale influence the way we fight wars now. It has headed on in the battle space, as in before, it is just the land, the sea, air and space but now, there is a battle space called the cyber battle space and we now have Military Units in developed countries that are formed just to prepare for that battle in the cyberspace.

Because of that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it really makes very good sense to sign up to this Convention - the only one that is there in the world right now, and partner with those that are at the forefront of this battle of fighting cybercrime. I think that as a small nation with a small economy like ours, it is important and makes very good sense for us to sign up and partner with those countries that are very well developed, they have been through this and are at the forefront, as I have said.

I was thinking, Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to conclude that as we connect, and we have heard that Google and Starlink are coming, and when we give them licence, they provide us with the cyberspace. I was just thinking of an idea that may be, for those who come and provide us with that, that perhaps there could be a levy or fee that we can charge them as part of their licence and that fee is used to advertise against cybercrime - little videos on television. We saw one during a workshop, where they

did one in Samoa - advertisements on radio, billboards, and I am sure Google, Starlink and Vodafone, those that provide the spaces can perhaps, be levied and provide funds and we advertise this criminal activity that is happening in cyberspace. It is just an idea.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wholeheartedly support the motion that is before Parliament. Thank you, Sir.

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I join my fellow colleagues and rise to offer my support to the motion that is before Parliament that Fiji ratifies the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime. So much has been said by those who have spoken before me, all supporting, willingness to join the effort that we are trying to discuss in Parliament this afternoon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we did receive a lot of submissions as a Member of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence. There was plethora of submissions from a wide range of backgrounds, including Government agencies, regional bodies, Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), private ICT companies, private individuals, Fiji Financial Intelligence Unit, Legal Practitioners, et cetera, and they all showed their support for Fiji to accede to this Budapest Convention.

I would also like to mention here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that I was part of the Parliamentary delegation that you led attending the Regional Workshop on Cybercrime at the Tanoa Hotel in Nadi, as alluded to by honourable Naupoto, on 6th May to 7th May.

During that workshop, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we really learned from experiences across the Pacific on the effect of cybercrime in their various jurisdictions and domain.

The outgoing Secretary-General of the Pacific Islands Forum, Mr. Henry Puna, also briefed the participants about PIFS's stance about the cybercrime in the region. PIFS has highlighted in its submission that they want the region to be a hard target for cyber criminals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, PIFS in their 2015 Strategy for Blue Pacific Continent in the *BOE Declaration*, recognises the challenge posed by cyber criminals and the importance of cyber security across the region.

I think honourable Koya has touched on the gender analysis. If Fiji decides to accede or ratify the Convention, then we urge that Fiji integrates a gender perspective in the implementation and enforcement of the Convention in our domestic context. This will help us to create effective laws, policies and procedures to efficiently prevent and combat cybercrime.

We also urge that Fiji considers other Conventions which offer more protection to women and girls, such as the Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention), to work hand in hand with the Budapest Convention, to ensure protection of our women and girls and the recognition of online gender-based violence as being a violation of a woman's human right. There were a lot of recommendations that were included in the Committee Report, and I hope that it had all been all spelt out properly by those who have spoken before me.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the threat of cybercrime in our domestic and regional space and our international border, tantamount to the uncontrolled drugs entering our shores. If we are not careful, surely it will ruin our economy and our people. We must act decisively now. We cannot do it alone and we need our international partners and instruments to combat it.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on the motion before Parliament, and I render my full support that Fiji ratifies and accedes to the Budapest Convention.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in a nutshell, what we have done today is not paying lip service to our international partnership. In this space, we have actually enacted the Cybercrime Act before the ratification. There will be incremental changes in terms of our legislative reform as highlighted - there are a number of other subsequent changes that will be made.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do note the issues that are covered here. What concerns me, when I look at the statistics provided by the Police, is the low number of reported cases. Just allow me, Sir, if I may, to give you examples.

For dishonesty - obtaining or dealing with personal financial information, there was only one case in 2019 but none from 2020 to 2023. On unauthorised modification of restricted data held in computer - 32 cases in 2019, but none in 2020 to 2023. On reported cases of traffic in obscene publication which normally occurs there were three cases in 2019, three cases in 2020, two cases in 2021, three cases in 2022 and four cases in 2023.

The pattern in this is the same. It is the lack of awareness for members of public to report this matter to the authorities. What we see is that a lot of these are being published online, but they are not pushed to where they supposed to be.

For online safety, no report of causing harm by posting electronic communication from 2019 to 2023. For posting an intimate visual recording, only one case in 2021, none from 2019 to 2023. What I urge is, for those members of the public who are listening in and for Members of Parliament, it is our responsibility to inform the members of the public.

In part of my consultation awareness, there is a team that normally accompanies me in terms of telling the people. As honourable Koya said, "Yes, we all have a phone, but how to use the phone is what we lack."

I also pay homage to the members of the former Committee who had actually started the work. I have read all through the communications and the brief, indeed, thank you, honourable Naupoto and the Committee, and for the recommendations that is before Parliament.

Other than that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we fully endorse the acceding of this Budapest Convention.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I would like to also echo my big *vinaka vakalevu* to the Committee for bringing this up, and even to the honourable and learned Attorney-General. We did follow up by letter to the honourable Prime Minister through to the honourable and learned honourable Attorney-General, if they could fast-track the Treaty to be endorsed by Parliament.

So much has been said, we have been placed on record where we have been asked to accede to this Convention. The mention of the two Protocols that accompany this Convention is another important issue because then, it allows us to interact right across our border to other countries, so this is a cross-border problem and now, we can access through those two Protocols, all the help that we can get from international countries right up to the United States, et cetera.

Again, I am thankful to the fast-tracking of the Treaty to be endorsed by our Parliament through you, honourable and learned Attorney-General. I thank each and every one of you for the endorsement of this Convention. Even though Kiribati has also endorsed it, Tonga is already recognised, being part of the region, apart from Australia and New Zealand, that have endorsed the Treaty. They are accessible to the help of the Council in Europe and that is what we are aiming for. Once we ratify and send our endorsement to the Council in Europe, then everything takes its course from there.

Thank you once more for all the hard work by the previous Government in getting the Cyber Act approved - endorsed by Parliament and enacted as well, but this is the most important one. Even for me in attending that workshop, I knew very little about this, almost nothing. I thought it was to do with some outer space thing and then I was surprised in sitting there, most of us who were there - the Senior Deputy Speaker of Vanuatu, also indicated that when he came to the meeting, he could not understand what he was going into, until we met. Then through interaction, we managed to learn a lot of things and I was a bit taken aback because of the time taken to reach the endorsement you have just done quite a while ago.

There were so many issues. The Government of the day then, fast-tracked the Cybercrime Act, et cetera, and that is good. But we, in the Opposition - the SODELPA, at that very time, we were suspended from Parliament for six months, that saw to this time length been totally affected and that is why our lack of knowledge of this particular Treaty.

I am kind of reiterating this to you, honourable Members, because these are some of the things that came our way, that saw to the delay in the endorsement of this Convention, especially by our very own Parliament. Then now, seeing that this has received support from each and every one of you, or Parliament as a whole, I am so grateful for that because I, and the Secretariat, do not want to be pointed at, that we were delaying this. That is the reason for that letter to the honourable Prime Minister and then to you, Sir, but probably the letter was still coming when your Treaty was pushed forward to be endorsed today.

That is all that I wanted to add because this has been a new learning experience for most of us. I only remember quite vividly that when we attended meetings abroad on IPU, et cetera, it was the Leader of the Opposition who took an interest in all these - cybercrime, et cetera. To me, cyberspace and cybercrime are foreign words. I said to myself, "What the heck are we talking about here!" I thought it was to do with some outer space thing.

However, when the Senior Deputy Speaker of the Vanuatu Parliament raised in our workshop, "Have you come across some problems? Can you give some examples?" Luckily, I looked towards the honourable Deputy Speaker because she filed a complaint with the Police regarding certain information that was put out in the social media that was so damaging to her. I asked for her forgiveness when I opened my mouth and said that, but she felt at ease again. But the Deputy Speaker of Vanuatu learnt a big lesson there, especially for the two Protocols that are part of this Treaty. It is there, waiting for us to endorse it. Once again, thank you so much and a big *vinaka vakalevu* to each and every one of you, especially to the Committee and to you, honourable Attorney-General.

Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of today's sitting and I thank you for all your contributions once more. Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 5.48 p.m.