

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

FRIDAY, 24TH MAY, 2024

[CORRECTED COPY]

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FRIDAY, 24TH MAY, 2024

The Parliament resumed at 9.50 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All honourable Members were present except the honourable Aliko Bia.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Thursday, 23rd May, 2024, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

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

Year 8 Students and Teachers – Marist Brothers Primary School

Honourable Members, this morning, we are joined by the final lot of Teachers and Year 8 Students of Marist Brothers Primary School, and also the Under18 Rugby Team from Bucalevu Secondary School. Sitting amongst the Marist Brothers Primary School Students is one of my grandchildren, Pita Mawi. Welcome to your Parliament.

His Excellency the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China

Honourable Members, I also welcome His Excellency the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China and she is accompanied by the Third Secretary, Dr. Angela Li. We welcome you warmly to the Parliament of Fiji. Thank you for your presence and making the effort to come and witness for yourselves how our Parliamentarians conduct themselves.

At times, they behave like children too and are at each other's throat, debating. Children, this is where laws are made - laws are enacted, laws are amended, and laws are repealed as well. That is the core function of the honourable Members here. There are 55 of us, including the honourable Prime Minister who is sitting amongst us, sometimes everyday, when we sit and conduct our meeting.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I also welcome the two groups from the two Schools and remind the students from Bucalevu that when I was there, the oldest boy was under 14

years. From 1958-1961 so when you go back to school, know that someone from that school can end up sitting here or here.

PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND CERTAIN DOCUMENTS

Honourable Members, I had issued an instruction to the Secretariat to include the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji 2019-2020 Annual Report, so that it could be referred to the relevant Standing Committee.

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

Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights

Parliament of the Republic of Fiji - 2019-2020 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 48 of 2024*)

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

1. Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji – 2022 Financial Statement of Government and 2022 Agency Financial Statements - Ministry of Finance (*Parliamentary Paper No. 52 of 2024*); and
2. Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji – Crown Land Lease System (*Parliamentary Paper No. 58 of 2024*).

Standing Committee on Social Affairs

1. Nausori Town Council – 2016 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 9 of 2024*);
2. Nausori Town Council – 2017 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 10 of 2024*);
3. Nausori Town Council – 2018 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 11 of 2024*);
4. Nasinu Town Council – 2016 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 4 of 2024*); and
5. Nasinu Town Council – 2017 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 5 of 2024*).

Standing Committee on Economic Affairs

Sugar Research Institute of Fiji 2021 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 157 of 2023*)

Honourable Members, please, take note that the following Reports are for information purposes only and will not be referred to any Standing Committee:

1. Third Quarter Appropriation Statement - Actual Expenditure from 1st February, 2024 to 30th April, 2024; and
2. Reserve Bank of Fiji Quarterly Review March 2024.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Cane Supply in Rakiraki
(Question No. 88/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry inform Parliament on how the supply of cane in the Rakiraki area will be increased?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I answer honourable Maharaj, I would like to make some comments on what the honourable Leader of the Opposition said last night in regards to Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC) and the staff attitude, what has been happening and why there is a decrease in the sugar industry's cane.

You are right, the attitude of staff and FSC over the last 10 years or so, have resulted in the farmers having to run to the workers rather than the workers going to the farmers and advising them. That is the only observation that I have seen.

I have warned the FSC workers and said, "If you are slack on your work, just go home. Give the job to someone else". I will give you an example of a Sector Clerk in Wailevu, who never visited the farmers. He was sitting in the office all the time. One day, the farmer re-planted his cane, he requested the Sector Officer to go and survey his farm so that there could be a claim, but the Clerk never turned up. So, the farmer made a video of his farm and complained against the Sector Clerk, and he forwarded it to me. I immediately forwarded that to the FSC CEO and said, "This is what the Sector Clerk is doing." I told him, "You either fire him or I will fire you."

(Laughter)

So that Sector Clerk got out of the office. That is the type of attitude I am taking about.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- So, I wholeheartedly take your advice, honourable Leader of the Opposition.

As I have said, I am a 'no nonsense' Minister. I got hands-on job.

Honourable Premila Kumar complimented the sugar industry, supported the motion but, unfortunately, when I was replying, she was not in the Chamber. I do not know why, but if she wants to support me, she should be here.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Just answer the question.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Listen to me! I am coming to that, I have got plenty time.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- What are you saying?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- I am just simply saying that you were not here when I was replying.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Answer the question.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Yesterday, when I was talking about the sugar price, honourable Bala was complaining. Why were you complaining?

HON. P.K. BALA.- Who was complaining?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- You were complaining last night.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Answer the question.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- My answer is coming. Now, listen, to what I am going to say. Honourable Maharaj, you question me about Ra. The honourable Member sitting next to you is from Ra.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Answer the question.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Yes, I am coming to that. Honourable Ratu Niudamu is a high Chief of Ra. He actually asked me; “Honourable Minister, how can we get together and increase the production in Ra?” A Chief like him from that side, he is offering to assist the Government on how we can increase production.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Answer the question.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Yes, I am coming to that!

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the question asked by honourable Maharaj regarding the measures taken to increase the supply of cane in the Rakiraki area. We, as Coalition Government, recognise the crucial role that the sugar industry has in our economy, particularly in supporting the livelihoods of many families in Rakiraki and beyond. To address the challenge of sugarcane supply in this area, we are implementing a multifaceted strategy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, based on our current data, the total area registered for cane cultivation across the four sectors in the Penang Mill area is approximately 8,142 hectares. However, only 34 percent (2,729.3 hectares) of this land is currently under cultivation, resulting in a production of only 141,520 tonnes of cane last year.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker Sir, there is significant potential to boost production in the Rakiraki cane belt as it was in the good days until after 2016. If we can increase the cultivation area to, at least, 60 percent of the total available area, we could produce approximately 250,000 tonnes of cane, and this was achieved in the past years. To boost production, our initial focus will be on both, Ellington 1 and Ellington2 Sectors, where less than 20 percent of registered land is currently under active cultivation.

Re-engaging inactive producers, Mr. Speaker Sir, is a primary strategy. Many farmers who have ceased sugarcane cultivation need encouragement and support to return to farming, which is essential for increasing the overall productivity of the Mill.

We have introduced various incentives and programmes aimed at encouraging existing farmers to expand their cane cultivation and attracting new farmers to the industry. These incentives include grants for planting sugarcane, subsidies for fertilizers, a \$5 tonne incentive for improving production, manual labour harvesting support, provision of farming equipment and improved cane varieties that promise higher yields.

Recognising that adequate infrastructure is vital for efficient farming, we are investing in improving access roads to cane farms and upgrading drainage systems to mitigate the impacts of adverse weather conditions. This infrastructure support, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will enable farmers to cultivate and harvest cane more effectively.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are enhancing our Agriculture Extension Services to provide farmers with an up-to-date knowledge and best practices in farming. These include training on the modern agricultural techniques, pest and disease management, soil fertility management, et cetera. These services by the Sugar Research Institute of Fiji (SRIF) and FSC are designed to increase productivity and sustainability in cane farming.

Engaging the youth in farming through the formation of small cooperatives is another strategy to increase cane production. Mr. Speaker, Sir, SRIF will train young farmers, particularly, the *iTaukei*, in best management practices, ensuring they will be well equipped to manage and cultivate sugarcane effectively.

The Government is working with financial institutions, especially the Sugar Cane Growers Fund (SCGF) to facilitate easy access to credit for the cane farmers. By providing low interest loans and financial products tailored to the needs of the cane farmers, we aim to remove the financial barriers that prevent farmers from investing in their farms and expanding production.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our collaboration with SRIF will focus on developing new cane varieties that are more resilient to climate change and disease while offering higher yields. The ongoing research and development efforts ensure that our farmers have access to the best possible resources to increase cane supply.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to highlight a significant issue, the farmers have faced immense challenges since the removal of the Penang Mill in Rakiraki in 2016. It is disheartening to note that reinstating this Mill will require just over \$5 million at the time. However, due to the irresponsible decision-making by the then Government, this Mill was sold as scrap.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- We are now bearing the cost of the decision by providing the farmers with a cartage cost of \$5 million plus a year. Over the last seven years, we have already bled \$30 million for their ignorance, and we will continue to burden them. This is a glaring example of the wastefulness of the previous Administration.

Nonetheless, we are moving strategically to eliminate this recurring cost and convert it to an investment that will benefit the taxpayers in the long run, instead of catering to the incapable decisions of the FijiFirst Government.

The investment of the building of a new mill in Penang will, no doubt, reward our investment, attract new and young farmers, particularly our resource owners, and enhance other economic activities in Rakiraki and Tavua again. We expect this investment to operate efficiently enough that the debt incurred to build a new mill will be self-sustaining in the long run. In fact, we anticipate that this will be a game changer for our economy.

Our Coalition Government has been ardently advocating for the establishment of a new mill in Rakiraki to replace the one dismantled by the previous Administration, which deeply hurt our farmers and shattered their confidence in no time.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Listen! If you have questions, then listen to my answers.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- A Point of Order, Sir. Standing Order 60 on the relevance. I would just like to get a clarification. Two days ago, the honourable Minister gave some figures that it is \$7 million to cart sugarcane from Rakiraki to Ba. He actually stated that the cost on that particular day was not \$5 million. Within two days, the honourable Minister is giving two different figures. Can the honourable Minister, please, clarify because it seems that his figures are coming out of thin air and not from the staff of the Ministry? How come it was \$7 million two days ago and today, it has come down to \$5 million?

MR. SPEAKER. - Well, let me rule on that point of order. Rakiraki is quite some distance away and as the crow flies, that is a different mileage altogether but if you follow the road, probably it is much longer. That is why his figures are different. What is going on, because if you follow the road

Anyway, thank you, honourable Maharaj. Honourable Minister, you may resume your seat you have completed your time.

(Laughter)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, thank you for your response. Specifically with respect to Rakiraki and this new mill that you have been talking about for months on end, you have heard the honourable Deputy Prime Minister talking about Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) and the production of ethanol.

Honourable Minister, can you tell us, will Rakiraki be also a centre and are you incorporating the plan to produce ethanol out of that new Mill? In terms of that, how are you going to achieve that increase that you have spoken about with respect to sugarcane production, going on to include the production of ethanol with respect to sustainable aviation fuels?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Our plan is this, honourable Koya, the ethanol plant will be constructed in Ba.

MR. SPEAKER.- Will you address me, Sir.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- I apologise, Sir. The ethanol plant will be done in Ba because when the Rakiraki Mill is done, we will have to bring in molasses and sugar out of Rakiraki Mill and Lautoka Mill into Ba Mill. So that will be the center of the ethanol plant, but the Rakiraki Mill which will be established will have a refinery together with it. So, we will have a refinery in Rakiraki because as you know, honourable Koya, we are exporting all our raw sugar overseas and then we are importing white sugar back to Fiji. So Rakiraki Mill will have a full scale

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Who is questioning me? Question me properly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they do not know about sugar, they will not ask about sugar. All I am saying is, I will answer you. Our plans are very intact, it is going to happen, it is not a match box project. It is a big project, and we are currently negotiating with both, India and China, to build a mill and we will see which is the best option and, thereafter, we will take it to Cabinet.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, another supplementary question; due to *TC Winston* and the closure of Penang Sugar Mill, a lot of cane farmers stopped doing cane farming and they diversified to other crops. My question to the honourable Minister is, what incentives are there to bring these farmers back to sugarcane farming?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, well, as I have said, in the last Budget, we had 13 different programmes and in the next Budget, we will have another seven new programmes which will focus on Rakiraki itself and the farmers in that area. So, just wait for a while and we will rebuild.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Thank you honourable Minister for Sugar for your nice answer. My supplementary question is, as you have already promised the Rakiraki farmers, when will the construction of the Rakiraki Sugar Mill start?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have just said, it is not a matchbox project, but a project that has to be well-designed. Currently, we are talking to the suppliers. They will give us a proper price, then we will come back to the FijiFirst Party to take a bipartisan approval, and then we will start. It will not start now but will definitely finish before the end of our term.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, much has been said about the Rakiraki Sugar Mill. What is the total tonnage of cane that we get from Rakiraki Mill? Sir, I have a follow-up question on the basis of his answer.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Can you repeat the question, please, because honestly, I cannot see you and I cannot hear you.

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, can we have some provision for breathalyser here.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, is someone driving?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- A Point of Order. That question implies when he is asking the question, do you need a breathalyser or referring to the word 'breathalyser', which is imputing improper motives.

MR. SPEAKER.- I have corrected him on that one, honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament because no one is driving here. So, honourable Minister, do you want to reply to that supplementary question?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- What was the question?

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, can the honourable Minister inform Parliament what is the total tonnage of cane that we get from the Rakiraki Mill? Then, I also have a follow up question.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, currently, we are getting about 140,000 tonnes out of Rakiraki but we are expecting that with the new mill to be there, we should be having about 3,000 tonnes of cane per day.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Do you mean, having it after five years?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Well, look, I was not here.

MR. SPEAKER.- Hold on, hold on!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- So, what I am saying is, the answer is 140,000 tonnes.

MR. SPEAKER.- That is enough, Sir. What is your follow-up question?

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, is that enough tonnage to build the Rakiraki Mill?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is what I am saying, we have to increase the tonnage, and the Mill will take two years to be built. So, from now onwards, we have to encourage the farmers, including the children and fellow members of the *mataqali*, to start growing more sugarcane so that we can have sufficient sugarcane for the Rakiraki Mill in two years' time.

Aviation Industry - Growth in Tourism Sector
(Question No. 89/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation update Parliament on the key activities that the Aviation Industry is undertaking to support growth in the tourism sector?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to answer the question asked by honourable Vocea, regarding the actions the Aviation Industry is undertaking to bolster growth in the tourism sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some highlights on the key activities, include the following:

1. Infrastructure Development

As part of our 10-year National Development Plan, we are investing in upgrading our airport infrastructure to handle increased air traffic and reduce congestion. This includes, the expansion of terminals, upgrading of runways and improvement of air navigation aids.

(a) Nadi Airport

Fiji Airports is undertaking a comprehensive expansion and modernisation of Nadi Airport. Key projects include:

- (i) Expanding the Departure Lounge with new VIP and bus lounges, additional waiting areas and reconfigured zones, all phased to minimise disruptions.
- (ii) By year-end, there will be –
 - new off-gate aprons for more aircraft parking;
 - ongoing pavement maintenance;
 - planning for a transit hotel, retail building and new car park;
 - Gates 1-3 will be relocated between 2025 and 2028, with new gates added in 2029;
 - Upgrades include new aerobridges by 2026;

- Advanced check-in systems with biometric integration by December 2024; and
 - a new CT scan-based baggage handling system by 2026.
- (iii) A solar PV farm will increase power capacity in phases to achieve net zero emissions by 2050. The Airport will also introduce –
- electric vehicles and charging stations; as well as
 - new fire trucks and enhanced training facilities, along with upgraded communication, navigation and surveillance systems to meet international standards.
- (b) Nausori Airport (2024-2033)
- (i) Fiji Airports is currently carrying out conceptual designs for the refurbishment of existing terminal to maximise efficiency and enable better passenger experience. In addition to that, Fiji Airports will continue to work with Government on the required funding to develop a new international terminal wing, as long-term expansion plan.
- (ii) Fiji Airports is considering the creation of Nausori General Aviation Precinct and a taxiway to boost its commercial revenue, as well as free-up space at the Nadi Airport.
- (iii) The Landside Master Plan, which is currently on tender stage, will guide the commercial development in Nausori.
- (c) Outer Island Projects
 Fiji Airports is actively involved in several development initiatives for the outer islands. They have awarded Flame Tree Development Fiji Ltd with a FJ\$10 million contract to carry out pavement maintenance on five Airports - Labasa, Rotuma, Savusavu, Lakeba and Matei.

This contract, awarded in April 2024, after a rigorous tender process, is part of ongoing maintenance efforts funded by Fiji Airports. Additionally, construction for the Labasa Terminal will begin in mid-2024 at its current location, with plans to acquire adjacent land for a larger terminal in the future.

- (d) World Bank Project – Fiji Tourism Development Programme in Vanua Levu
 I have briefed Parliament on the World Bank Project, Mr. Speaker.
 Fiji Airports is supporting the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation in upgrading Savusavu and Labasa Airports as part of the World Bank-funded Fiji Tourism Development Programme in Vanua Levu.

Phase I, spanning six years, involves building a new terminal at the current site to serve passengers for the next five years. A larger terminal, with expanded capacity and parking, will be constructed on a new site near the Airport, pending World Bank assistance. Concurrently, a feasibility study for a new domestic airport in Savusavu will be conducted.

- (e) Remote Tower Systems - Outer Islands
 Funded by the World Bank, the implementation of remote tower systems for outer islands, like Labasa, will utilise advanced technology, including high-resolution cameras, sensors, microphones and a local processing system, to provide

comprehensive flight information. This initiative aims to enhance the operational capabilities and safety of these remote airports.

(f) Matei Airport

Future plans for Matei Airport, along with other smaller outer island airports, involve constructing modular-type passenger terminal buildings with Government assistance, as these airports are owned by the Government and managed by Fiji Airports. A concept design for extending the Matei Airport runway has been developed, requiring land acquisition around the airport. As I have stated, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we want to land the ATR in Matei.

(g) Proposed Yasawa Island Airport

There is proposed development of luxury resorts around the Yasawa-i-rara, Blue Lagoon area and Nacula area. At the latest count, there are about 10, and the Government is committed to this endeavour and is currently examining all feasible alternatives to foster the construction of an airport and corresponding facilities to support these investments. This initiative aligns with Government's strategic objectives to distribute the advantages of tourism across the archipelago.

2. Fleet Modernisation

Our national airline has a very young fleet and doing a wonderful job internationally, but we need to upgrade/replace the local equipment being used domestically. The reason, Mr. Speaker, is that our national airline has reported some impressive results, and this augurs well for aviation and the future of our tourism industry.

3. Regulatory Reforms

We are modernising our aviation safety and security legislation, to ensure it is in line with ICAO's requirements and fit for purpose.

4. Safety Enhancement Initiatives

Also, with ICAO, and I had highlighted this week about the liberalization of our aviation policy as stated. This is part of what you face today if you want to go into markets, like the USA.

5. Open Skies Policy

But I want to emphasise that when we talk about Open Skies Policy, it will be considered on a case-by-case basis bilaterally. So, there should be no fear of our national airline being threatened by some of the big boys internationally.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these initiatives, coupled with our strong national oversight system compliant with ICAO standards, are aimed at ensuring that our aviation industry remains safe, reliable and efficient, thereby, supporting the growth of our tourism sector. We remain committed to overcoming the challenges we face and leveraging the opportunities that lie ahead to bolster growth in the tourism sector.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the terminal in Labasa is important, no doubt, there is a long-term goal and should be achieved for the betterment of the people of Labasa and Vanua Levu as a whole. The immediate remedy that is required is to reduce air fares from Suva to Labasa and from Nadi to Labasa.

What is the honourable Minister doing in order to bring the air fares down? Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will give an example, I was trying to book my mother's flight over the weekend. It was costing me around \$700 return, compared to previously when it was offered at \$65 one way. What is the

honourable Minister doing to reduce the air fares between Suva-Labasa and Labasa-Nadi?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, operating an airline is a business and the laws of supply and demand apply. Airlines have a yield system in place, so a yield system is whereby you book at a certain time, you pay a certain fare. When you book last, you can be paying the highest rate in the system.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- That is the reality of the game today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but looking at the bigger picture, he scoffed at the World Bank Development Programme for Vanua Levu. When you uplift Vanua Levu and you uplift tourism in Vanua Levu, there will be volume traffic, there will be frequencies and the air fare will come down. So, do not scoff like you did, honourable Maharaj, about this initiative.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question to the honourable Minister; in terms of the Fiji Link services to Vanua Levu and to Nadi, can Fiji Link and Fiji Airways ensure that there are planes available?

There are mechanical problems and if you move forward, this could frustrate many tourists, given that flights are cancelled in the last minute due to mechanical problems. That has been an ongoing issue in the last six months. How can we ensure that we have a proper aircraft servicing the people, so they are not affected if they have a connecting flight from Nadi to overseas and they are told at the very last minute that the plane from Nausori is not coming to Labasa?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think the problem with our people on the other side is their selective hearing.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- I did highlight in my delivery that we are replacing the old equipment used locally.

HON. P.K. BALA.- When?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- We are going to replace them. As I have said, Fiji airways has a very young fleet internationally but locally, they will be replacing the old equipment. It will not become an issue once we replace the old equipment, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they do have quite a remarkable record now on on-time departure and arrival. For Labasa, the day will come very soon when you check in your bag in Labasa and you can pick it up in London if you are going to London. That is happening, Sir, it will be international check-in.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is the way forward for aviation in Vanua Levu. You can check-in your bag in Vanua Levu and you pick it up where you are going - London or whatever. *Vinaka*.

30 Million Tree Planting Programme
(Question No. 90/2024)

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry inform Parliament on the total number of trees planted to-date under the 30 million Tree Planting Programme which targets reforestation and climate change mitigation?

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister for Fisheries, I notice you have been planting a lot of trees in Lomaviti.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the question raised by honourable Koroilavesau. Thank you, honourable Member, for your question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in January 2019, the 30 Million Trees in 15 Years Programme was officially inaugurated. This tree planting initiative is part of Fiji's green economy recovery from the ongoing impacts of climate change and the impacts of COVID 19.

Additionally, Fiji's tree planting initiative is contributing towards meeting our international commitments under the REDD+ initiative that was initiated in 2009 and the World Bank's Emission Reduction Programme signed in 2021 to remove and reduce emission.

Furthermore, the 30 Million Trees in 15 Years initiative is part of Fiji's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) where countries set targets for mitigating Greenhouse Gas Emissions that cause climate change and for adapting to climate impacts.

The reforestation of degraded forest through this tree planting is an attempt to utilise degraded forests to address broad thematic areas of need, including carbon stock enhancement, connecting forest corridors, coastal restoration, food security, flood mitigation stabilisation of riparian systems, catchment restoration, enrichment planting, community woodlots and industrial planting.

MR. SPEAKER.- Sir, honourable Koroilavesau asked the number of trees you have planted so far, Sir. We have been informed about that.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will elaborate more on this to let them understand the reality. I will come to that, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Can you explain a bit more?

HON. K.V. RAVU.- I have to elaborate on that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Since the start of the Programme in January 2019, more than 19.1 million trees have been planted, including almost a million mangroves, on more than 17,200 hectares of land across Fiji. This means that we have planted approximately 64 percent of our target with 36 percent yet to be achieved, which is 10.9 million trees. A further breakdown of trees across the various Provinces can be provided, if required.

The approximate number of trees planted by Province included Ba Province planting the most with almost 5.8 million, followed by Nadroga with almost 4.2 million, Bua with 3.9 million, Ra with almost 2 million, Macuata with 1.2 million, Tailevu at 0.6 million, Rewa at 0.5 million and Cakaudrove

at 0.49 million. Others include - Naitasiri with 267,000; Serua with 127,000, Namosi with 73,000, Lomaiviti with 22,000; Lau with 37,000; Kadavu with 4,000 and Rotuma with 40 trees.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, of the 19.1 million trees planted, pine makes up about 14.9 million, mahogany at 776,000; mangroves at approximately 931,000; sandalwood about 17,000 and others, which include native trees, fruit trees and teak which is about 2.5 million. The numbers achieved are a positive testament of the diligent work being carried out by my Ministry with the support of our communities and our partners - Fiji Pine Limited, Fiji Pine Trust and Fiji Hardwood Corporation Ltd, as well as the people of Fiji.

However, we also acknowledge that there are challenges that we continue to face, associated with activities aimed at reforesting degraded landscapes, particularly in relation to the relatively lower survival rate of certain species in specific sites.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many factors affect the growth of seedlings including, drought, fires, animals and flooding, as well as the suitability of certain species to different sites. The Ministry has also assisted vulnerable areas in relation to the above factors with the erection of fences, construction of fire breaks and proper land preparation.

In the past, research work carried out by the Department of Forestry had focused mainly on improving the growth of our two major plantation species - pine and mahogany, contributing to their current success. But it is not only these species that are vital to the achievement of our goals, it is also the implementation of the tree planting programme, such as the 30 Million Trees in 15 Years initiative.

The Research Division of the Ministry has been undertaking site specific research studies, focusing on species with higher mortality, to ensure improvement in the survival rates, moving forward. That is why our Research Division has established permanent sample plots to monitor the growth of each species and their survival, to help determine which species to plant at different sites in the future, and the actions required to improve the survival of the planted trees.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have also revised our Monitoring, Reporting and Verification Guidelines to provide our monitoring team the ability to trace back the survival and mortality rates to activities, such as seed collection and associated treatments. Moreover, our team on the ground is also increasing their focus on the beating up of seedlings and planting new seedlings in the areas that did not survive under the initial round of tree planting.

Additionally, we need to ensure that communities are able to take ownership of the developments, especially the tree planting initiative. If communities take ownership and look after the trees planted on their particular land, then survival rate could be greatly increased. Ultimately, these initiatives will help us improve our future survival rates, therefore, the achievement of our goal in restoring degraded landscape.

Based on the improvements planned, I am confident that we will meet or even exceed the target of 3 million trees in 15 years, helping to restore forestry ecosystem, supporting socio-economic development, and positively contributing to the achievements of Fiji's international commitments.

I wish to thank the people of Fiji for their continued support in assisting my Ministry towards the tree planting efforts. I also have a table of the Provinces that have been planted. If they want, I can also hand it over to them.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think we all realise how important the RED+

Programme is to us and the fact that we have already planted 19.1 million trees, I think, according to the honourable Minister.

The question to the honourable Minister, of that 19.1 million trees that are being planted, is there a particular portion that has already been designated for carbon trading or has the work going on with respect to that particular part of what we have been discussing earlier on regarding carbon trading? Has any portion of that 19 million been designated for or being looked at in terms of being designated for carbon trading?

MR. SPEAKER.- It depends on how old the trees are, honourable Minister. The figures you are quoting, maybe they are just one year old or something.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, I think carbon trading is coming after that initiative and we are working on it right now.

MR. SPEAKER.- Not even that young.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- *Sa dina.*

HON. K.V. RAVU.- They are still young, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- According to the honourable Minister, it is still young so they really cannot...

HON. MEMBER.- .. approve the carbon trading.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, that is why I said 'designated for'. Is he looking at a particular area where we know we can utilise in terms of designating it for carbon trading so that the landowners or whoever is responsible for that is aware that they actually have an asset so they can use?

MR. SPEAKER.- *Qo me sa vakagalalataki tu me baleta na ka ni* carbon trading.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Yes, later on, we are looking into that when they grow into that size.

MR. SPEAKER.- What size?

HON. K.V. RAVU.- We cannot do it now because it is a bit too small.

MR. SPEAKER.- What size you are talking about, big size?

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, under this programme, it was aimed at helping resource landowners. Basically, the landowners used to establish their own nurseries and sell it back to Government for the replanting programme. I just wanted to ask the honourable Minister if that programme is still continuing?

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Yes, Sir, it still continues until today.

MR. SPEAKER.- Still on and still continues, that is the wholesome answer.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a quick question to the honourable Minister, there is an over reliance now on plantations - pine and mahogany. We have lost most of our indigenous species. So, in that replanting programme, can you please clarify the level of efforts on bringing back our indigenous species and of course, the future plan as well?

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, through this initiative, we are also including our indigenous species all around the country.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Seruiratu, are you satisfied with that reply? Planting the indigenous species all over the country.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- The follow on question from here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because when you talked about it, one is for timber purposes and for our food security as well. Breadfruit and all those, come under this classification. So, if the honourable Minister can be more specific. That is why I asked, where is the focus and what are the future plans because forestry is important for biodiversity as well? Thank you.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- I will respond to that question later, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Why? You tell me why you want to refer to it later? You do not have the answers with you, that is all.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Yes, Sir, I do not.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for the answers that he has given to the questions. I noticed that the major reason for the 30 million trees over 15 years was for biodiversity, maintaining our forest cover. One of the things that I have noticed recently during our site visit is that a stock of raw material going into sawmills, our timber industry, is declining and there is a look now to replace that. We have traditionally relied on to species that grow faster that can be harvested faster as well, and there are some works going on in Vanualevu on Eucalyptus and Acacia.

While we are doing this replanting, the Ministry of Forestry also looked into planting species that might be available faster for harvest for those sawmillers who are now facing severe shortage of raw materials into the sawmills. It is happening now, and it is going to worsen in a few years' time. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think the failure before is, we put the wrong plant in the wrong soil texture and now we are doing it the right way. We are putting the right trees in the right place where they can grow much faster and to be utilised in other species. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. P.K. BALA.- I think the bipartisan is really working in this Parliament because the last time, the honourable Minister provided us with some supplementary questions to this side of Parliament. I will have to check whether he has given this time or not, but it is good that the bipartisan is really working in this Parliament.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have just heard from the honourable Minister that the previous programme is being continued. Is there any specific region that have seen significant progress? Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Vocea, you will confuse him a lot.

(Laughter)

Do you want to respond to that question, Honourable Minister?

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, can he repeat the question, please.

HON. K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have just heard what the honourable Minister said, that the previous programme has been continued by your Ministry. So, is there any specific region that has seen significant progress?

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think in Nayarabale in Vanualevu, there is a place there and also Saqani.

MR. SPEAKER.- You are talking about Cakaudrove?

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Yes, in the village of Naiyarabale.

MR. SPEAKER.- Are they planting in the village?

HON. K.V. RAVU.- The area consists of 500 acres of land.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I think I will adjourn Parliament now for tea and those in the gallery are invited to join the Members of Parliament.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.54 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.45 a.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before we move on, I noticed that the gallery is quite full. Please, honourable Members, join me in welcoming the former students of Suva Grammar School.

Ni bula vinaka, welcome to your Parliament. It has been a while, and we enjoy your presence today. I understand you have been going through a very busy time in celebrating your coming together, your reunion and we welcome you. We understand that Suva Grammar School is a great school, I think we have former students here as well and we wish you well in your celebrations. *Vinaka vakalevu*.

Border Security Actions
(Question No. 91/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration inform Parliament what actions have been taken or are planned to be taken to ensure border security, given the recent influx in criminal activities and illegal border entries?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for her question. In response to that question regarding the actions that have been taken, or plan to ensure border security amidst the reported criminal activities and illegal border entries, I am providing Parliament with the following update:

1. National Border Security Upgrade Framework
Government has developed a comprehensive framework to enhance border security, incorporating a coordinated approach among all key stakeholders. This will facilitate seamless information sharing and risk intelligence exchange.
2. Automation of Passenger Arrival Cards (PAC)
We are introducing a digital PAC system, allowing travellers to submit information electronically before arrival. This will improve efficiency, reduce clearance times and enhance surveillance capability.
3. Advance Passenger Information
This is in collaboration with the United Nations Office of Counter Terrorism. We are implementing systems to collect real-time passenger data, and this will help prevent the entry of inadmissible individuals.
4. Maritime Security Strategy
We are in the process of developing a robust maritime security strategy to protect our maritime domain. This involves co-operation among maritime agencies and to detect and disrupt illegal activities effectively.
5. Issue of addressing fake recruitment companies in Fiji
We are also aware of the recent surge in fake recruitment companies exploiting the current labour shortage in Fiji to bring people into the country illegally. To combat this, we have intensified our efforts to identify and shut down this problem of operations. We are working closely with international partners and local agencies to track and prosecute those who are responsible. Additionally, we have launched public awareness campaigns to

educate potential job seekers about the risk of fake recruitment schemes and to encourage them to verify the legitimacy of these recruitment agencies.

Now, these initiatives, Mr. Speaker, Sir, once approved by Cabinet, will significantly bolster our border security, ensuring Fiji is well prepared to address both, traditional and non-traditional security threats. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his answer to the question in which the scourge of drugs, et cetera, criminal activities and illegal border entries that we are actually speaking about currently, all have an impact on our major earning industry. I have seen, as of this morning, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister has ensured that a statement was given with respect to a New Zealand TV investigative series which has gone way off the radar with respect to making comments about Fiji.

Honourable Minister, in the interest of all of us because this is something of concern to all of us, will you be issuing a statement? I understand they did interview you, actually condemning that particular report that has come out of New Zealand from a very mischievous reporter.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- I thank the honourable Member for the supplementary question. I think there has been much talk about the Dreaver report, as well as the *60 Minutes* that came before them. Let me say that I appreciate Ms. Dreaver's reporting that brings to light our Fijian drug situation, and this is not something that I am shying away from because this is speaking about the real issues that affect us. However, I think that maybe in many places, some of the information that she has shared through that programme, are being particularly exaggerated. On the same token, I think she may have also been misled by a lot of people in that particular report.

I would like to say though, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that Fiji is a safe destination. Our Government is secure, we have institutions that are in place that look after the security of not only Fijians, but also those who are visitors to our shores. We have independent institutions that are in place that protect their rights, if they are here as our guests, as well as for our locals. We also have systems that are in place that ensure that justice is served where it is needed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst to a certain extent, I am very concerned about some of the inaccuracies in the statements that Barbara Dreaver had stated, I appreciate the fact that she has continued to raise this issue, something that we are working at, as a country, but let me assure Fiji and our people, as well as for those who would like to visit our shores, that it is safe to come here.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- I thank the honourable Minister for that response. Drugs is the topic of the hour right now in Fiji, and they are saying about the zombie state and all the mess that is created by drugs. My question is, do we have drug cartels or criminal organisations here in Fiji that control the promotion and distribution of narcotic drugs?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- I thank the honourable Member for his supplementary question. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the drug situation in Fiji, as we understand it, is controlled, not only by people who come from abroad and bring drugs here for the ones that come from abroad, there are also those who are involved in these operations in Fiji and this has been going on for a while, as I have earlier stated. We, as a government and as a whole nation, are doing our best at this stage with the resources that we have to curtail this, and bring these people to justice.

I have always acknowledged that drug is a social problem. The responsibility of the curtailment of drugs is the responsibility of everyone. When children take drugs, in the first instance,

it is their parents. We cannot blame anyone else for that. Then there is the rest of the society, then the Government, the *lotu* the *vanua* - we are all responsible for this.

It is part of our responsibility that if you know people who deal with drugs in Fiji, then you must report them. We cannot condone these actions if we do not report them. We must report them, and the police must act on this. That is why, Mr. Speaker, Cabinet will approve this week, the new Narcotic Drug Strategy, as well as the Narcotic Bureau, which gives special powers to Government to deal with this. We must not have any mercy for these people - those who do this business, to kill our people and our children.

I ask the public out there to, please, help every other member of this beautiful place and nation to help cure us of this problem that we have. We must not condone anyone who deals with illicit drug activities. That is not good for anyone in Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Maybe, I did not hear you properly, honourable Minister, on the thrust of the question that was provided by honourable Naisa. Are there cartels? Was that the question you are raising? Are they here in Fiji?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have said, we know that people are dealing in drugs in groups, whether we call them cartels or not, it is another issue. There are intelligence reports that suggest that there are groups of people who deal in this matter across the Fijian society and that is the proper word to use for them. But I would like to assure you that these are the people who we need to bring to justice, and they are the ones who are controlling these operations here.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question is on the two areas that are being asked - the criminal activities and illegal border entries. On criminal activities, honourable Minister, this is just the lack of presence of police in our towns and cities. One of the biggest deterrent is when people see police out there, and I ask if you can get the police to go out there and be present.

The second one on illegal entries which include both, personnel and contraband. I think you talked about the illegal entry of personnel. But for contraband, we know that ships are the high-risk carriers for contraband, compared to aircrafts because aircrafts cannot stop in mid-air and change cargo, but ships can. Aircrafts are tracked from point A to point B, but ships are not. Have you, for the time being, increased your port boarding and search operations where all the ships are coming in, local that you go in, board and search for illegal contraband?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first of all, the question about police, I agree with you. Police must step up its activities, and I think this is the point that we continually remind the police that their presence is essential to providing confidence to the people.

Government will continue to resource the police to be able to do that. I am looking forward to the appointment of the new Commissioner of Police, who, I hope, is going to make sure that they reset the directions for the police, including looking at the issue of their increased presence within our community.

In terms of ship boarding, Mr. Speaker, some weeks back, I opened the Ship Boarding School that is run by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in Togalevu. This is one of the areas where we will build our capacity on to be able to go out there and board the ships that we suspect. Also, with the arrival of the new vessels, I am glad that the Republic of Fiji Navy Ship, *RFNS Puamau*, added to the fleet, will be able to have a better maritime surveillance, better control and a better outlook out there in the sea, in our maritime zone, and also do boarding operations for

suspected either illegal fishing or some other transnational crime happening in the high seas. Thank you.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, with the high level of engagement that we have with our development partners, have we been able to secure more and more equipment, et cetera, at our border agencies, to ensure that they are not as porous as some may seem, and at the forefront, is obviously our airports?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, in terms of immigration and the systems at the border, I have spoken a little bit about some of the initiatives that we do. But in terms of enhancing the capabilities that we have at the border, we are working, in particular, with the Australian Immigration Department through the Ministry of Home Affairs, particularly in the different areas of capability that we need to have as a modern airport or as an area, or capabilities that are used throughout other airports in the world in terms of cameras, et cetera. I could name the whole thing for you, but suffice to say right now, we are working with our partners, particularly the Australians, in the areas of Home Affairs to help us build security around the frontlines, especially at the airport.

HON. V. NATH.- Thank you, honourable Minister for your answers. Knowing that a lot of illegal activities happen in the Bligh Water and at sea and we know that Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF) has very advanced tools, how are you utilising the tools, like the Automatic Identification System (AIS), to get the global positioning of the ships or yachts that enter our waters?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- I thank the honourable Member for his question. That responsibility in terms of tracking yachts out there in the sea, is presently done by the Navy. They actually have a great system out there which is the AIS, and I would encourage every Member to go down there. You will see that they keep track, almost on real time, of the ships that are out there in the sea. This information is then shared with the rest of Government that deal in maritime security, including FRCS, FIMSA and Ministry of Fisheries. I would encourage every MP to go down there and take a look, at your own free time. Thank you.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have a follow up question. I thank the International Maritime Organization, the former Prime Minister and the honourable Leader of the Opposition, that we were able to secure those machines that MSAF has. It is an advanced system. I remember that there was a dialogue between Police, Navy and MSAF, to collaborate and use the joint equipment so that they can identify the position of these yachts. Is it still in talks, honourable Minister, the AIS system that I am talking about?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- I think down at the Navy, they actually have this capability which literally looks at everything out there in the water. Then they use to coordinate the national effort to then go and look at it, also integrating air assets to go out and have a look. I am not quite familiar with that asset that is with MSAF, but I can tell you for sure that with the operations room down at the Navy, you can see every boat out there in the water. That is if they do not turn off their beacon, I think. Of course, it is illegal, if you turn off your beacon. That was how we tracked the drugs that were caught in Lautoka. We started monitoring this ship when it left Mexico in South America.

HON. V. NATH.- It is not only drugs but human trafficking too.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, do address the Chair. You are making a running commentary with the honourable Minister.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, we all know that these drugs have probably gone to another level now. If we start talking about chemsex and bluetooth, how bad is that in the country

right now, honourable Minister?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, I am always, not very emotional, but becomes very sentimental when it comes to drugs in this Parliament because there was a lot of discussions in the past revolving around this issue but I do not want to remain in the past. I am absolutely sure, Sir. I think the honourable Minister for Health has spoken very well about the issue of chemsex and also bluetooth. I am not an expert in that. I hear of stories when people gather and do these things - the young people who indulge in drugs and then go on and do these things at night.

As far as I am concerned, I think the previous explanations by the expert is adequate enough. I think the more important thing is that we must realise that our children are doing this and that we must try to do everything to stop it.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.-Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question to the honourable Minister. We are talking about all the new systems that are foreign to us, that come with glitches and other issues. We have a system in our nation - *vanua*, *lotu* and the Government. Will the honourable Minister consider the role of faith-based organisations in creating social awareness and willing to support them in this cause?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Member for the excellent question. The *vanua* and the *lotu* are at the centre of the fight against drugs. We are talking to them we are dialoguing with them and one of the last major ones that we had was held in the Fiji National University last week. I think I have even suggested to Government that Government must subsidise or it must fund the Church and the *Vanua*'s efforts to deal with drugs where it is appropriate because this is a problem, I have admitted in the past, cannot be dealt by Government alone. So, we need the help of the *Vanua* and we need the support of faith-based organisations and civil society organisations in the whole of our nation to deal with this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as far as the question is concerned definitely, faith-based organisations, *na Vanua, na Lotu, ena vukea na cakacaka 'go*.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think in the same interview, there is this gentleman that is talking about the Pacific being used as a buffer zone between the target markets, Australia and New Zealand, which is basically saying that these people have intelligence - when the drugs is coming and then allows it to come into the Pacific, we deal with it here, before it goes into those markets.

I know that the Forum is coming up. I agree with you that drugs cannot only be dealt with by Government, the *Vanua*, *Lotu*, but it has to be dealt with regionally also because it is trans-border. Perhaps, in the next Forum, the honourable Prime Minister is going to attend, where we can bring up this issue and tell these bigger countries, "Look, do not use us as a buffer zone. Try and get the drug before it hits the Pacific." I think it is begging the honourable Prime Minister to take it up and we be a regional voice. I see he is laughing, and I know he will take it up. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his statement, and that is acknowledged. I want to assure Parliament that our international partners are helping us in many ways to do this. But for the problem that we have, I think we should take every possible opportunity to indulge and stick with our partners about how they can help us more for the problem that we currently face. I thank you for that statement.

MR. SPEAKER.- All I want to add to the exchanges that have been going around is that, we even have this problem in my village in Taveuni - that far. I have been hearing this global positioning

thing that you attach with the yachts and the boats, but a big load of drugs ended up in Nadi. It has come through that far to reach Nadi and imagine the ones that they sell in other places, like my village in Somosomo, Taveuni, they have all these are there. How it got there, that baffles me. We play our part in the *Vanua*. But what more could we do if we cannot even take the laws into our own hands? But we rely on the people that take care of the laws, but they keep pointing fingers. The putting of food on the table has affected this, poverty, and then unemployment and then the whole works and you remember these are villagers. That is all I want to add to this and, please, let us all join forces together in this one.

We need to see that we work hand in hand on this and try and address this big problem that we are having now. The statistics and the data that was provided in Parliament on schools by the honourable Minister for Education, that was quite surprising that this has reached our school children. They become, what has been termed by the honourable Minister for Women, mules or something. They are being pushed around and moving these drugs but I hope good sense will prevail here and we will join hands in this. The country, as a whole, needs to tackle this big problem.

External Review Committee
(Question No.92/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Education inform Parliament on the activities and findings of the External Review Committee appointed by the Higher Education Commission in November 2023 to assess Fiji's Universities?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in response to the question by the honourable Member, the preparatory groundwork has been completed in terms of the work of the External Review Committee and they are ready to start the consultation with universities, as mandated in the Higher Education Act 2008.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question to the honourable Minister for Education is in regards to the appointment of the Review Committee. The appointment was done on 3rd November, 2023. Does that appointment still stands or has it been revoked? I have been reliably informed that the appointment has been revoked.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- You have already answered your question. Mr. Speaker, Sir, he is already aware of the answer that will be coming from this end. *Qo vaka e taro kila tale tiko mai.*

According, to the statement that you have made in this Parliament on 22nd November, 2023, the Higher Education Commission took the initiative on and re-did the advertisement, calling for expression of interest, and they have made the appointment of the new External Review Committee.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I agree with the honourable Minister for Education that I suggested to the honourable Minister to re-look at the composition of the Review Committee. My question is, although the appointment lasted for a very short period of time, it must have come at a cost. What is the total cost incurred from that mistake?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a former HR Director of the Ministry of Education who is asking the question. He is aware of the appointment process that has been undertaken. The appointment that was done initially, there was no cost involved or incurred in terms of the External Review Committee that was appointed.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question to the honourable Minister is, now that you have got a new team or new set of Committee established, by when do you expect the report to be out? We have already lost quite a bit of time in appointing committees rather than getting the committees to do their work. By when do you expect the report to be out?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the review of the Committee, as mandated in the Act, usually takes a cycle of five years to seven years. The University of the South Pacific is the only University that was reviewed in 2019, so University of Fiji and Fiji National University have not been put through this process of review. The concerns that have been raised from students, parents and guardians whom their students have attended these Universities are many in terms of relevancy of the courses, duration of the courses, accessibility of the courses and the cost of attending the Universities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the fifth year that guarantees and is mandated to have this University come under review because the last one was in 2019. They will be completing this review towards 30th October, 2024. Because of the changes due to the concerns that were raised by the honourable Member, the initial deadline that was mentioned in this Parliament has been reviewed. Now, it is 30th October, 2024.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for the replies to his questions. If I am approached, I may decide to do the EOI because it is more transparent. My question is, what sort of advice was given to him earlier on that led to the appointment of the initial set of committee members without going through the transparent processes of the EOI? What sort of advice was offered to him that led to the decision which was apparently a mistake?

MR. SPEAKER.- I think that is a pretty difficult question to raise because you are asking about what sort of advice was given, but I leave it to the honourable Minister.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Sir, as I have earlier advised, the appointment was done according to the Higher Education Commission as per the decisions of the Higher Education Commissioners.

Waste Management Operations
(Question No. 93/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government update Parliament on the Nasinu Town Council, taking ownership of their waste management operations from Suva Municipal Council?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must thank the honourable Member for asking the question. That is a very important question because I think this week, there were some issues, there were some comments made about garbage collection around Nasinu Town.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a brief background on the garbage collection services at Nasinu Town boundaries, in the past, there were a lot of issues regarding solid waste collection by the residents of Nasinu, as well as the ratepayers. There was an initiative that started in 2020 where the Suva City Council came on board, there was an agreement signed between Suva City Council and Nasinu Town Council for the Suva City Council to take over garbage collection services around Nasinu Town areas.

With that, there were five garbage trucks, three open trucks and a backhoe which is still owned by Nasinu Town Council but used by Suva City Council. When Suva City Council did garbage collection and they engaged a total of 25 staff to assist them in their collection of solid waste around Nasinu Town areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now, the Council to Council have come to an agreement that there is a need to separate their services because the initial agreement is now going to expire in July 2024. For August, 2024, it is expected that Nasinu Town Council will take over the collection of rubbish within its own Municipality.

We need to also understand that Nasinu is a big area. Currently, there is a total of about 11,252 rateable properties, as well as about 17 informal settlements, with 1,317 households. So, in total, Nasinu Town Council has to service an area which has 12,569 properties and a population of around 65,000. Within the Nasinu Town boundary, there are seven wards and it is now the responsibility of the Special Administrators. I have faith in the Special Administrators who are going to take this on board and also come up with new strategies on improving the solid waste management services around Nasinu Town areas. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just wanted to ask the honourable Minister a supplementary question; you are talking about waste collection, can you clarify waste collection in the different delegated boundaries, please?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, currently, each Municipal Council within Fiji is responsible for collection and disposal of solid waste within their municipal boundaries, including peri-urban as well as rural areas. The collection of waste in delegated areas is subsidised by the Fijian Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this started in 2018, whereby all the 13 Municipal Councils were given the responsibility to collect kitchen waste from the extended boundaries, usually managed by the Rural Local Authority. For the current financial year, \$2.25 million has been granted to support those Municipal Councils that were not in a financial position to fully cover hard and green waste collection costs. What is happening right now is Municipal Councils have extended their services to those areas like Nausori is now looking after Korovou, Lami is also now looking after Navua, Savusavu Town Council is now looking after Nabouwalu areas, and the Government is going to continue with subsidising these costs to ensure that we collect rubbish from all these areas by the respective municipalities.

MR. SPEAKER.- Who is looking after Lami, honourable Minister?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Lami Town Council has now extended its services to Navua.

MR. SPEAKER.- It is clearer now.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it needs to be clarified. I recall the honourable Deputy Prime Minister making a statement and asking; whose idea was this to transfer the trucks to Suva City Council?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, shared services is very much legal within the law, and this was the first time we were trying to look at waste management as essential as water and electricity. The idea was to form a waste management company, owned by these three Municipalities so that they can combine their resources together and provide a thorough and a better efficient services. But, of course, the process started, unfortunately, we had COVID-19, and you know what all happened after that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question to the honourable Minister is, that in the last Budget, there was a reduction of \$1.5 million for the services to be provided to the rural areas. How has that reduction affected the service collection?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reduction in the grant actually does not affect the services provided by Municipal Councils because if you look at bigger Councils like Suva and Lautoka, they have sufficient funds to support delegated areas. It is the smaller Councils where the Government comes in and assist the provision of services, especially the garbage collection services, which is an essential service. The medium and smaller Councils do not have the means or the income to support these services. Currently, with the cut in budget, that reduction is only to cater for those medium to smaller Councils that do not have the financial means to manage these services.

MR. SPEAKER.- I just make this quicker announcement, honourable Members. As a matter of housekeeping and for the purposes of complying with the Standing Orders, with respect to sitting times, I now call upon the Leader of the Government in Parliament to move the suspension motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

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

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we still have a few items on the Schedule 2 Questions, and also in terms of the Written Questions, and the items in the End of Week Statements to complete.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

QUESTIONS

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Minister, SDG 11 is about sustainable cities and communities and the honourable Deputy Prime Minister gave us a long statement the other day about how Government is approaching the implementation of SDGs.

Additional to the SDGs, the Environmental Management Act also specifically has clauses on solid waste and liquid waste. While you are providing details about how solid waste are being handled, there is a big problem that we face in our communities and, particularly, in our towns and cities on liquid waste. My question is, how are you addressing this issue and, of course, how are you also, in collaboration with other stakeholders, looking at ways to address the concerns?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the question raised by the honourable Leader of the Opposition is a very valid one and it is something that the Ministry is currently considering. Waste disposal is really a big issue right now in Fiji, not only within the Municipalities, I think all over our country.

The Ministry is currently reviewing the system that we have to ensure that we address all these areas. We are even having consultations with the Department of Environment, as well as other stakeholders, even with the civil society organisations, on how we can better manage this issue because if you look at it, there is no central body or authority that manages the issue of the waste management in Fiji. That is something that we are seriously considering and with Cabinet approval, it is something that we are also going to consider, to ensure that we take into consideration all the different types of waste - green waste, also waste from factories, including liquid waste, Sir.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- A follow up question, to the honourable Minister, Sir. He just mentioned that there are Municipalities and Councils that have money and, therefore, that money is used to provide that service in the rural areas. My question to you is, why are you using ratepayers' money to provide services in an area where households are not paying any rates to the Council?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must thank the honourable Member for her question. In fact, the issue of these bigger Municipalities subsidising or offering services to the extended boundary is something that took place during the previous Government's time. Even those are the questions that were asked by ratepayers; why do we have to subsidise or pay services for those who are not within our Municipalities?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- It was subsidised by the Government.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- So that is something that we are also looking at now and we are also going to consider that, may be reviewing so that we transfer this back to Government to look after the provision of services or financing of services to areas that are outside the boundaries of these Municipalities.

Foreshore Development Lease Processes
(Question No. 94/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources inform Parliament on the requirements and procedures used by the Ministry to issue 5-Year Foreshore Development leases?

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I echo the sentiments of Parliament in congratulating Suva Grammar School for their 60 plus four years anniversary that they are going to be celebrating tomorrow. Many years ago, I think, over two decades ago, I hunted down a lioness, so I am now part of the pride there, Sir.

(Laughter)

The ladies from *Ruku ni veidakua* are also in yellow today and they acknowledge the contribution of Suva Grammar to national life, but you will see that the RKS boys are also wearing their distinct tie. You can see the yellow is part of it, they are also honouring Suva Grammar School's 60 plus four years of anniversary.

Mr. Speaker, to begin with, I would like to just probably highlight some of the developments that happen in our foreshores which necessitates the leases and licences that are issued to it. They include tourism businesses, foreshore development lease, jetties when it becomes necessary to construct, wet leases in our mangroves and marine conservations, for example, the one that we

presently have in Naitauba Island and, of course, where there is a need to have filming consent, such as the shooting of the “Survivor” Series and “The Love Island”.

There are six main steps in the process of applying for foreshore lease or licence, with a meagre application fee of \$30. I think it is time to review that because of the extent of economic capital that is usually driven into these sorts of projects.

Step 1, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is, of course, the acceptance and the vetting of the application and the checklist. I am sure the honourable Kirpal would know and would have already seen. This information is readily available on the public portal of the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources.

Step 2, Mr. Speaker, Sir, involves the consultation and consent of customary fishing rights owners. This is a responsibility of the applicant to ensure that they go out and obtain the necessary waiver from those who enjoy the fishing rights over the foreshore that they have applied for. The consent waiver of fishing rights is then checked against the records that is held by the iTaukei Land and Fisheries Commission, commonly known as the *Veitarogi Vanua*, and once 60 percent of that is confirmed, then that particular step is satisfied.

Step 3, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that the applicant for this foreshore development is required to submit a determination screening of Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) for the development from the Department of Environment.

Step 4, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the determination of compensation sum for loss of customary fishing rights. This is the process where the Director of Lands requests the Director of Fisheries to provide a quotation on the total logistics and cost necessary for the team to conduct a fisheries survey and to compile a report, determining the quantum that might be due to the iTaukei Land and Fisheries Commission that has registered the customary fishing rights to the custodians. That payment is made into a trust account once that step is completed.

Step 5, Mr. Speaker, Sir, upon completion of all the Steps 1, 2,3, and 4, a submission is then made to the Minister for Lands, requesting approval for publication in the Gazette to publish a public notice as mandated under section 21(2) of the State Lands Act.

The second publication in the government Gazette is followed by 30 days objection period where members of the public, and this provides the check and balance within the system, they are invited to submit objections to the Office of the Minister for Lands should they wish to do so. At the end of the objection period, all objections are collated and submitted to my office, and that would also include the final brief from the Director of Lands and his team.

Step 6, of course, is the decision-making step where the Minister, if he or she says that the development would infringe more on public rights to the access of the foreshore, they have an opportunity to appeal against that decision.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, most of the developers are unable to complete their development within that five year term because once they get a lease, then they seek finance from financial institutions. My question to the honourable Minister is, whether the Lands Department screen or check the financial status of a developer because most of the time we have seen that when the developer gets a lease, he then seeks loan from financial institutions? The second question will be whether the foreshore development lease can be sold?

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you very much. He is already in breach of the Standing Orders. He is asking two questions in one question. He should know very well that

he is entitled only to one question. So, I will answer only the first one.

MR. SPEAKER.- We have just gone through Standing Orders review, that is why he is so informative now, and as a lawyer, he is telling you that you have breached Standing Order.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, at times, these sorts of ambitious foreshore development does surpass the five years. I have not had that experience and I am sure honourable Kirpal can ask the experience of the previous two Ministers of Lands, they have had experiences such as that, but I am sure that it does happen because there are some developments that do, of course, run past the five years.

However, what I think is central to determining whether you should renew the development lease is to see how far the work has progressed. If no work has progressed and if you look at the financial viability of the company or the developer and you are not satisfied that they can push the development further, then of course the Minister has every right not to renew it. But if there is substantial work that has been done on the ground, there is promises in the completion of the development. There is funds available, there are construction material that is also able to complete the work, then of course, it brings a huge economic benefit to the country and also to the locality. Those, I think, are the ones that the Minister would approve to have an extension of their development.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, in terms of foreshore leases, a lot of the times when Fisheries Impact Assessments are being done with respect to the compensation to the landowners or the owners of the *qoliqoli* at that particular time, the experience from before tells us that not always does the landowning unit accept the valuations, et cetera and the work that has been done by the Ministry of Fisheries, and they object to it. My question is, do you have an alternative channel of people who do Fisheries Impact Assessments that can assist the Ministry of Lands, or is it strictly only the Ministry of Fisheries that does Fisheries Impact Assessments? Remember Sir, there are landowners that object to the Ministry of Fisheries doing it for reasons best known to themselves.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can only speak of my experience in the past 17 months. It is only been with the Director of Fisheries and I have not had any experience where *Qoliqoli* owners have not been satisfied with the quantum that have been levied by the Director of Fisheries.

MR. SPEAKER.- I want to adjourn Parliament now and before doing so, I would like to thank the former students of Suva Grammar School for coming in numbers to today's Sitting. A big *vinaka vakalevu* to you. I just can recall when the primary school was up here somewhere and the boarding school for boys was still operating from where we were told yesterday by the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs. That building is now going to be known as the Fiji Arts Gallery, is it honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs?

HON. I. VASU.- Sir, it is the Fiji Arts Council.

MR. SPEAKER.- It was the old boarding school for boys, that was Grammar. It is a history of the development of even Suva. They are moving down to Veiuto, you still exist as a very well-planned development, the roads, et cetera, and for you to come in and grace our Parliament, we are so blessed and so happy. Once again, we wish you well in your celebration. *Vinaka vakalevu*.

The Parliament is now adjourned for lunch, and we will resume when the bell is sounded.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.42 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.35 p.m.

Initiatives to Promote Economic Diversification
(Question No. 95/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications update Parliament on what initiatives the Ministry is undertaking to promote economic diversification?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the very good question raised by honourable Tunabuna, and before I do response, I was in a deep thought when I was listening to the words of the honourable Minister for Home Affairs, on the discussion that happened with regards to a challenge that is in front of us. The word I thought about was 'boldness'.

With what is happening in our country, it requires is to be bold - bold in the effort to address the challenge of drugs, as well as in our endeavour to rebuild the architecture of the Fijian economy. Thus, hopefully, my answer today will shed some light on where your Government is headed, in terms of its desire to diversify the economy in Fiji. There are so many things to talk about, I will just pick on a few, hopefully, to give an idea to the honourable Members of this august Parliament and to the people of Fiji of where we are headed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for far too long, talks of economic diversification have existed, without much action taken. The Ministry which I lead has taken it upon itself to undertake concrete initiatives to expand and diversify our Fijian economy. We have established a Commercial Agriculture Taskforce to support the diversification and expansion, specifically, focusing on attractive investors into the agricultural sector and, hopefully, aquaculture as well.

Recently, I led a delegation to the inaugural Fiji-North America Business Mission, which was held in Canada and the USA. The delegation consisted of Government agencies, the private sector and some of our very own exporters.

At that Business Mission, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji Water formerly announced that they are exploring commercial agricultural opportunities to Fiji. They also have made an announcement in the papers over the last few days, and this had been made possible by the close collaboration between Fiji Water, the Wonderful Company, the Commercial Agriculture Taskforce and the honourable Prime Minister, as they explore the revitalisation of agricultural commodities. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have to say that this announcement can potentially be a game changer for Fiji in commercial agriculture.

On the back of this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can also advise that there is another investor seriously looking at commercial agriculture and they are currently based in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and are already in discussions with Fijian Holdings Limited and Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF).

Another thing that I thought I would share when talking about commercial agriculture, for those of you who may have noticed, just recently, FNPF and the Bank of the South Pacific (BSP) joined forces and are now joint shareholders in a company called Future Farms Pte Limited. That, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a signal to the rest of Fiji that two of our largest institutional investors are serious about commercial agriculture in Fiji. And for those of us who can remember, when FNPF decided to start investing in tourism, the results are also shown for us to see in what happened many moons ago. I think the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation will

remember when that actually happened.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, moving on, we are also genuinely working on building our kava industry through the established Kava Taskforce, which is being led by the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways. It should come as no secret that the kava industry is anticipated to be a billion-dollar industry in the future. This was also confirmed by various actors in the kava sector in the United States, whom I had met along the margins of the recent Fiji-North American Business Mission. During the mission in California, we heard firsthand from kava importers, distributors and members of the different kava groups who promote and sell kava, the potential that exists in kava.

With kava evolving from being a commercial ceremonial drink to the development of different ways to drink kava and have niche kava products, we need to develop and strengthen standards, the legislative framework to protect our kava industry and strengthen the quality of kava exported from Fiji. We need to ensure the right legislative framework is in place, and which is why, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are pursuing the Kava Bill and hope this will move things forward.

Apart from kava, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a bit of focus going on in noni, ginger, turmeric, mahogany, and fisheries potential, as part of our desire to diversify and, Sir, it will probably surprise you that the noni industry, globally, is about US\$2 billion, and there is some more potential.

Turning to the Nutraceutical and Traditional Medicine Industry, with the rapid growth of globalisation, we need to be innovative with our approaches to generate new opportunities for our economy. To this end, we are also trying to further develop our nutraceutical and traditional medicine industry, including medicinal cannabis. We are leading a Cabinet-mandated taskforce which is exploring the establishment of medicinal cannabis in Fiji, and with the support of the Australian Government, a feasibility study has been undertaken and I will be reporting back to Cabinet soon on the results and, therefrom, hopefully, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can start developing the legislation to actually start this industry.

In terms of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have said quite a bit in the last few days of ICT, suffice to say that with the entry of *Google* and *Starlink*, we have a major potential in the ICT industry in our country. At lunch, the honourable Attorney General introduced me to a couple who are currently doing good work in Levuka and they are IT experts. They have only but reaffirmed my expectation that there is massive potential for our country and for the Pacific for that matter, in the ICT.

Just for some additional information, *Google* is going to invest about \$200 million in Fiji to create its own data centre. This will create that pathway that we all expect, that will happen in the ICT sector. Of course, as I have mentioned, education is key. The Government has already partnered with USP in trying to look at developing the ICT sector, and I hope to expand more on that in the near future.

Sir, the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) Industry is another of those industries that is starting to gain momentum. It was 3,000 people before COVID, it is now at around about 8,000 people, and these are some of the things that we are focussing on, Mr. Speaker, in trying to deliver a diversified Fijian economy.

Of course, we are also focusing on trade agreements. We have talked about and ratified the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) Agreement. We are in discussions on Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) Plus with the Australian Government and also closely looking at the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) as well, Sir, in terms of what that can do for Fiji.

Finally, Sir, there is a big commitment in the Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) sector and cooperatives. I feel that if we actually develop some of these sectors well, we will put the country in a very good footing in terms of economic diversification.

Sir, I also welcome the comments made by the honourable Leader of the Opposition. He was keen to, sort of, see how he could get involved in terms of agriculture and also sugar, and I think, hopefully, with the brief time that I have had, I have shared with Parliament and honourable Members of this Chamber, some of the serious efforts that are going in, to ensure that our economy is genuinely diversified which will create jobs and get more taxes to be able to battle some of the challenges that we have, as mentioned by the honourable Minister for Home Affairs.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Very quickly, honourable Minister, I think you have heard all of these before but your neighbour and brother, the Deputy Prime Minister, will support this, in terms of diversification, and I spoke about this morning. One of the areas that Fiji could really benefit out of is sustainable aviation fuel. I think it helps the sugar industry to get a better price for our sugar by producing more ethanol. Is this an area, honourable Minister, that you will be concentrating on heavily to ensure that we actually get into that particular space?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- It is interesting that you mentioned that, honourable Koya. Again, I have been reaching out to various consultants just to get some contacts on various industries. I met two gentlemen from well-known authorities in terms of sugar and what they said to me was, "A sugar industry based on global prices alone is not sustainable". So, to your point around developing value-add products, such as ethanol, to be able to assist with aviation fuel and other products, or other value-added potential, is worthwhile pursued, we certainly support it and we will actually try and do our best to work with the honourable Minister for Sugar to see what can be done.

The consultants also did tell me that in some parts of the world, sugar is looked at as an energy source, not as a sweetener of food. When you think about it that way, you do understand that there is a lot of other potentials in the sugar industry, and we are certainly going to ensure that, that is pursued as well, as part of the economic diversification strategy.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- A quick follow-up, Mr. Speaker, if I may, in view of what you have just said and in view of what the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation and I witnessed, the European Union (EU) has entirely backed Africa with respect to this, and they forgot about the rest of the Pacific. So, will we be engaging with our development partners to seek assistance that can put us in this space quicker and sooner than we anticipated?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- I did mention it in terms of the Trade Agreements, that we are seriously looking at signing up to the interim Economic Partnership Agreement with the EU and I think once that is signed, it will make some of the conversations around sustainable aviation fuel a lot more easier from our development partners' side.

I hope to bring to Cabinet very soon the justification around why we should join ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA) and as you know, Sir, even in terms of PAFCO, it is uneconomical for them to export to the EU because of the 35 percent tariff that is currently imposed because we are not a signatory to AIPA. Once we unlock AIPA, I feel that some of the things that you have mentioned will be very doable.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- There being no further supplementary questions. That takes care of the Oral Questions and now we go into Written Questions.

Written QuestionsGroundwater Projects
(Question No. 96/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources inform Parliament on all Groundwater projects that were to be drilled and reticulated in both, large and small islands in the 2023-2024 financial year, to include the following information -

- (a) the budget of each project;
- (b) the date each project was or is scheduled to be completed; and
- (c) the percentage completion of each project?

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as permitted under Standing Orders 45(3), I will table my answer to the question at a later date. Thank you.

END OF WEEK STATEMENTS

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, each Member may speak for up to 10 minutes with a 10 minute response by the Minister responsible for the subject matter of the Member's speech. No seconder is required and there will be no other debate.

I now call upon honourable Koya to deliver his End of the Week Statement.

Transparency, Accountability and Judicial Independence

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to give my End of Week Statement on Transparency, Accountability and Judicial Independence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the interpretation of the law is a must and must be met with sound understanding of the law and, especially, in an unbiased manner to basically ensure that the integrity of the judiciary is upheld, Sir. Why I say this, Sir, is that we need to understand this particular concept so that we can ensure if anything is untoward and it is rectified quickly, and from what we have heard in this past week, it would seem to me that the honourable Attorney-General and the Government is working to further building the integrity of Government and the Judiciary.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to quickly talk about transparency, accountability and judicial independence, as I have said, as I feel this is something that needs to be said so that the people of Fiji can understand the importance of how it affects their daily lives.

Allow me first to explain one of the pillars, Sir, and I will be succinct. In terms of transparency, this talks about the accessibility and openness of Government. This allows everyone the ability to see what the Government does and is doing and that the law and their rights are being upheld, and this is very important as it will build trust between the people and Government, and it also prevents corruption.

In terms of accountability, the Government has to be held accountable for their actions at all times. Both, elected and non-elected people of Government, have a responsibility to explain their decisions and actions to the people of Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This powerful tool is used to keep public officials

in check, and also used to prevent the abuse of power. It is also important to build the people's trust in Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

In terms of Judicial independence, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is very important because it is there to maintain the independence from the two arms of Government. Judicial independence is vital for the upholding of justice and the rule of law, to ensure that cases are decided fairly and the constitutionally protected rights of the people of Fiji are intact.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I may quote the honourable Attorney-General this past Thursday where he said, "the integrity and effectiveness of a judicial system is paramount to the health of our democracy and the wellbeing of our society". Let me build on this, Sir. The essence of democracy lies in its transparency and accountability and those in power with respect to the people that they serve. Transparency and accountability is actually demanded by law, and our democracy needs to ensure that the three arms of Government remain completely independent. We cannot allow for the blurring of the lines for any reason, even especially if it is politically motivated, or for any other reason.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last 12 months or more, maybe about 17 months, crime in Fiji has skyrocketed. No one is putting a blame on anyone, but it has skyrocketed. So, it is actually good to hear that the honourable Minister for Justice, along with the Judiciary has worked to expand the Courts - the Nadi Court, the new Lautoka Complex and established new court complexes around Fiji, to empower the Judiciary to expedite the backlog of cases.

With the rise of the use of methamphetamine in Fiji, we can only expect that there will be a plethora of cases that will clog the Judiciary in months to come. As we all know, the honourable Minister for Home Affairs is actually working very hard to ensure that the Police are empowered to ensure that all those are those people who break the law are brought to justice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to remind the honourable Minister to, please, remember that some of the planned refurbishments and constructions that were put on hold, were put on hold because we went through a pandemic, and that was COVID. It was not through any other reason, it was not through laxity, and I am not sure how much of that is falling on deaf ears. Projects were put on hold because our nation came to a standstill, and we needed to divert funds. When you look at these things, you have to put it into perspective. There was a lot that could not be done. We had the country to look after, and all of those such projects were put on hold.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for any democracy, especially like ours, for it to stand tall, we need to understand the concept of legal precedence, and this needs to be maintained at the highest level. It is precedent that ensures that cases are decided in a similar way that will lead to a stronger and more predictable legal system. It is this that sets the tone for our Judiciary, and it will help the people of Fiji better understand the potential legal consequences of their actions.

Therefore Mr. Speaker, Sir, one must be very wary that precedent is something that you do not play with, as it will have a major role to play when it comes to the doctrine of *stare decisis* and the erosion of this particular doctrine in Fiji is a bit of a worrying trend, Sir. It undermines the core principle of law and the predictability of legal interpretation in the country.

To have a strong and fair Judiciary, we need to ensure that consistency is adhered to and will promote consistency in the application of the law. Where would it be abiding precedent or a persuasive precedent, we must understand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that precedent plays a vital role in legal systems and other things as we do in this Parliament. We have followed a lot of precedents that you, being a very senior member, have told us about it, and we have followed, Sir. It promotes

predictability, confidence, consistency and efficiency in the entire legal system.

With respect to transparency, Mr. Speaker, Sir, not just in the Judiciary but in Government itself as a whole, people need to understand that Government is a representative of the people and for the people. What we do in this august Parliament, Sir, what transpires in a Ministry and what happens in the Judiciary, is the right of that person or people to know. Most of these, sometimes, is taken care of by a lot of gazettes. It is a bit worrying that sometimes we do not get to see the gazettes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do have a lot to get through. The media also plays a key role to holding governments accountable and to ensure transparency. Only yesterday, we saw that some media outlets were bringing something up that was tabled, and it was only half sent out. That is not fair, that is not very unbiased. These particular outlets are bringing up something that was tabled and it is causing much debate in the nation. We will debate it today, Sir, and I am sure it will lead to robust debate, but we must understand that unbiased reporting is a must, where true accountability and transparency can flourish. Do not put something out just as a piece and half read it, and say, blame someone about it.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- In fact that particular report that I am talking about, Sir, had independence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is alarming that when people are unhappy, they use the media to push their narrative, and even have stories sidelined because it exposes the half-truth about their narrative that they are pushing.

One thing I do hope, Mr. Speaker, is that editors and publishers will push their reporters to start doing this and follow-up on stories. If it is an ongoing story, to build on the story, not just report on just one part or part of it.

When you look at it from a global perspective, Mr. Speaker, Sir, different countries are at different stages in terms of transparency, accountability and judicial independence. Some countries, like Finland and New Zealand, are often cited as examples of countries with high levels of transparency and accountability. On the other hand, there are countries where those principles are constantly under threat due to various aspects. It is important for us to learn from the successes and failures of other countries and adapt those lessons to us in Fiji, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in closing, maintaining transparency, accountability and judicial independence is not without challenges. This can range, as I have said earlier, from corruption to lack of resources, political interference and lack of public awareness about people's rights.

To overcome these challenges, it is important to strengthen the institutions that uphold these principles. We need to promote education and awareness about the importance of these principles to the public. It is important that everyone, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is held accountable, and it is paramount that people understand that accountability is the key to a strong and fair judiciary, and a government.

Mr. Speaker Sir, as a citizen of this country, it is our right to have access to information because we are free and in an independent country, and that is the quote from Thomas Jefferson and should reverberate in everyone's mind. This is so true; it is our right to have access to information and it is important that Government ensures that they are transparent in all that they do, but at the same time, as the great Nelson Mandela said, "the time has come to accept in our hearts and minds that with freedom comes with responsibilities". Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a very important topic and I share the sentiments of honourable Koya that, indeed, transparency and accountability are noble principles for any democratic nation to uphold and promote. However, you are measured by what you do, not by what you preach but what you actually do.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, two weeks ago, I was invited by the Fiji Media Association on the International Press Freedom Day. I was a bit surprised or probably shocked when it was revealed to me that I was the first Cabinet Minister to be invited to their function after 16 years. That means there was no media freedom in Fiji in the last 16 years. This Government brought light. This morning, we are talking about an issue that is concerning us. Why? Because people have the freedom to say it. Gone are the days where people were suppressed with fear.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you do not have to look far but look at this august Parliament. I look at my colleague, the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources, the former Director for Legal Aid Commission. Apparently, on a working day, he took a walk from his office across the street, a court case was going on, and he stood there with other members of the public. As he stood by, he did not realise that he was standing opposite the Suvavou House where the Office of the Attorney-General is, he spoke to a few people and later on, because of what was going on, he heard a *yaqona* session at Level 5, his contract was not renewed soon thereafter.

There were many others, Sir, I am one of them who is a living testimony. On 19th April, 2020, I made a decision in Nadi and on the same night, the decision was asked to be brought to Suva to be heard in the appeal at 2.00 p.m. and at 10.00 a.m. my predecessor criticised me. I did not complain, I moved on. At that time, I did not realise that I will end up here. “Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream.” People can now see that organisations operate on their own - independently, and that is important.

I have another story, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of a former DPP who is a Sri Lankan National, as she was celebrating her birthday on a Friday, there was a knock on the door, “Lata, you are to leave the country the very next day.” That also happened to the former Chief Registrar, also a Sri Lankan national, so both ladies. Imagine if you are foreigner and a woman, and you face such circumstances. She was removed. Guess, who replaced her? Mohammed Saneem. The question I ask is this, why was Saneem appointed when there were more matured senior lawyers than him? Why? Does he have any connection with the Attorney-General? Was he destined to go and be the PS for Justice, and later become the Supervisor of Elections? They can come here and say things, but there are examples. History speaks for themselves, the people of this country and the whole world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was enlightened when I read Mr. Mick Beddoes comment last week in the papers, “Finally, we can see justice. You are never given an opportunity to explain when your contract is not renewed. We have now extended the contract of the Judicial Officers to five years from three years, so that we give them the security of tenure, so that they are not afraid when they are giving judgments. Did we intervene when we are not happy with the Court’s decision? No! I have to constantly remind myself, and I remember what I had said in the first Cabinet meeting, “our legacy will be to follow the due process”. That is the legacy. It is going slowly but we will end up there. Yes, I agree, there is a lot of work to be done.

Mr. Speaker, Sir just before I sit down, I note that the other side was talking about accountability. Section 121 of the Constitution talks about the Accountability and Transparency Commission. Where is the Commission? We are now in 2024. All you have to do is set up a legislation, and we are in the process of doing so, Sir.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- We are! Where is the Commission?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- You will complete it.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- In Chapter 8 - Accountability. Where is the Code of Conduct that you drafted and submitted here in Parliament? Because it scrutinises the work of Parliamentarians?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can come here and complain, but you are measured by what you do. I do not appear in the Fiji Law Society and lecture every lawyer, no, I do not. I respect them.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I, I, I – I this, I that!

(Laughter)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- You listen!

(Hon. K.K. Lal interjects)

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- I am humbled, I am from Lomaiviti. Yes, I am proud to be from Lomaiviti.

(Laughter)

There is a lot of work to be done, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We must acknowledge that our country had gone through dark ages. As a lawyer, as a parent, for those in prison, for those graduates from Police and Correction Commissioners, we know that the system was toxic and it needed to be changed and that change came about on 24th December, 2022.

We are grateful. As I have said, we are thankful to the God Almighty. *Turaga na Kalou, vinaka vakalevu na nomuni rogoca na nodra masu na lewenivanua o Viti, me vanua ena valuta na veika dredre. E taro tiko na Turaga na i Talatala; na cava na i tavi ni Lotu? Me vakararamataka na vanua. Na cava na i tavi ni Vanua? Me vakarorogo na Lotu.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is our collective responsibility - all of us, wherever you go, to practice and promote transparency and to speak against drugs.

Much has been said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but I would like to thank Parliament. As shared by you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and by the honourable Prime Minister, there is some change. Yes, the wind of change is coming. We are thankful that we can actually take the time to ponder and discuss the national issues in a more pragmatic and practical way and create a new Fiji.

Financial Assistance to Resource Owners

HON. RATU I. TUIWAILEVU.- Mr. Speaker, allow me to deliver my End of Week Statement in the iTaukei language.

Ni tiko saka na Turaga Sipika, Turaga na i Liuliu ni Matanitu na Turaga na Prime Minister, ni tiko saka na i Vukevuke ni Prime Minister, ni tiko saka na i Liuliu ni To ni Veisaqa, ni tiko saka na Lewe ni Boselawa; au duri saka e na loma ni Vale ni Bose ena siga e daidai me'u vakamacalataka na veika e navuca, e tekivutaka, ka cakacakataka na Tabacakacaka i Taukei me baleta na nodra vukei vakailavo na i taukei ni yau bula.

Na i tukutuku au na cauraka tiko ena yakavi vinaka e daidai, au sa na sauma tale tikoga kina na nodra kauwai na noda lewe ni To ni Veisaga, era vakaitavi saka tiko e nanao ena vuku ni nodra vosa tiko na turaga na i talai, na Minisita ni Veika VakaiTaukei, ena i golegole ki Niusiladi ena siga saka e nanao. Mai na veigauna sa oti me yacova mai e daidai, na bolebole levu e sotava tu na i taukei ni yau bula, oya na kena vakailavotaki na sasaga me ra vakavure bisinisi ena nodra i yau bula, ka tara cake kina na bula ni kawa i Taukei.

Ena gauna ogo, era sega tikoga ni rawa ni solia na veivuke vakailavo na veibaqe kei na veitabana vakailavo eso ena vuku ni ririko e tiko ena kena soli na i lavo. Na ririko saka oqori e vakavuna tiko na nona sega ni yacova tiko na tuvuka ni veivakatorocaketaki kei na rawa ka vakailavo na vanua saka o Viti. Ena gauna e taura kina na ulu ni veiliutaki na Matanitu Cokovata sa tekivu me vakasaqara eso na i walewale matau me walia kina na leqa era sotava tiko na i taukei ni yaubula, ka vakatututaka na i walewale vakailavo me tarai cake na i yau bula, ka vueta talega na i tuvaki ni nodra bula na i Taukei. Sa mani lutu na madigi ki na Tabacakacaka iTaukei me vakadeuca na i walewale matau me vakamuri ka raica na votukana ni sasaga saka ogo.

Mani kaciva na tabacakacaka itaukei ena yabaki sa oti nai sevu ni nodra a bose vata na mata ni yau bula ena noda vanua. Sa qai vakatututaki mai na bose oqori me dua na nodra baqe nai taukei ni yau bula. Sa mani qai veitalanoataki talega ena National Economic Summit ka vakadonuya na Bose Levu Vakaturaga ka qaravi saka mai Bau. E sa qai vakadonuya na Boseyaco me qaravi na vakadidike me vakadeitaka ni rawa ni vakavotukanataki na vakatutu me dua na nodra baqe nai taukei ni yau bula.

Turaga saka na Sipika, na Tabacakacaka iTaukei sa qai vakadadamuria na nodra i walewale ni veiqaravi na noda qase, oya na cakacaka ni solesolevaki ka vakatokai tiko na Solesolevaki Framework. A mani cakacakataka na sasaga ogo na Tabacakacaka iTaukei, na Matabose ni Qele Maroroi, na Matabose ni Lavo Maroroi ni Taukei, Matabose ni Veika VakaiTaukei kei na Matabose ni Lavo ni Taukei (Fijian Holdings Limited), na koronivuli ni veivakarautaki mai Nadave kei na Valenivolavola ni Veitarogi Vanua kei na Wai ni Qoliqoli.

A vakarautaki na i votavota vakailavo e \$100,000 ki na Tabacakacaka iTaukei, ka mani vagolei sara vei iratou na Fijian Holdings Limited (FHL), me ratou qarava na vakadidike. Eso na i tavi e vinaka me soli ga vei ira na kena dau mera qarava, ka matanataki kina na cakacaka ni solesolevaki. Sa qarava vakavinaka na FHL na vakadidike me baleta na kena vakaduri e dua na baqe ni i taukei ni yau bula kei na kena vakaduri na bisinisi lalai se MSMEs.

Na i tuvatuva ogo, e tokona vakalevu na Bose Levu Vakaturaga, na Matabose ni veika vakaiTaukei ni yau bula kei na Matanitu ogo, me vukea na vakaduri bisinisi kei na tarai cake ni yau bula. Eratou qarava na cakacaka ni vakadidike ogo na Invexa Business Solutions, ka ratou vakadeitaka ni rawa ni vakaduri e dua na baqe me tagava na nodra gagadre vakailavo na i taukei ni yau bula kei na kena vakaduri bisinisi lalai.

E dua na vakatutu ena ripote, oya me sa veisautaki na Merchant Finance me vakarautaka na veivuke vakailavo me baleta na i naki ogo. Na Merchant Finance, esa tekivu cakacakataka na vakatutu. Ena vakarautaki na i tuvatuva ni veivuke vakailavo me veiganiti kei na kaukauwa ni bula vakailavo era se tu kina na i taukei ni yaubula. Sa vakadikevi oti ni sa rawa ni sotava na tabana vakailavo na ririko ogo kei na i walewale matau me walia na ririko vakailavo ogo. Sa vakamacalataki vakavinaka tu ena ripote.

Na FHL e tokona na i tuvatuva ni matanitu ka na veivuke ena kena taraicake na nodra rawaka vakailavo na itaukei ni yaubula kei ira na via vakaduri bisinisi na MSMEs. Na ituvatuva go e salavata sara ga kei na inaki a tauyavutaki kina na FHL, oya me vakalevutaka na bisinisi ni iTaukei.

Na vakatutu ena ripote, ena qai laveti kina Bose Yaco me veitalanoataka ka vakatulewataka na i tuvatuva me cakacakataki. E tiko talega na vakatutu na vanua me tuvai koya kina vakamatau na Matanitu me vaka na kena vakarautaki e dua na tobu ni veivuke vakailavo se credit-enhancement scheme, kei na vanua me bucini kina na vakaduri bisinisi se incubator/accelerator training facilities.

Turaga na Sipika, ogo na mataqali I tuvatuva ni veivakatorocaketaki ena veisautaka vakadua na buturara ni cicivaki bisinisi, ka na vueta na rawaka vakailavo ni iTaukei e Viti. Vinaka saka vakalevu.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank honourable Tuiwailevu for briefing Parliament about the resource owners and MSME investment bank now being implemented by Fijian Holdings Limited through Merchant Finance. The objective of the establishment of the resource owners and SME investment bank in Fiji is to significantly increase the wealth and participation of iTaukei and resource owners in economic activities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Invexa Business Solutions was engaged in September 2023 and the final version of the report was endorsed by the FHL Board at the end of March this year. It has since been presented to me, and as had alluded to by honourable Tuiwailevu, I will submit the report to Cabinet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the conclusion of the Feasibility Studies is that there is a strong case for the resource owners and MSME investment bank and that Merchant Finance Limited is the right vehicle to set up a new resource owners and MSME dedicated division to achieve the objectives of significantly increasing the wealth and participation of iTaukei and resource owners in economic activities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, aligned to the feasibility studies, Merchant Finance has started the implementation of the dedicated resource owners' division with the creation of a new team called Vanua Finance. The sole purpose of this team is making finance accessible to more iTaukei and resource owners' businesses. Merchant Finance have also started their focus on the MSME by creating a new gender-based financing team called the Marama Finance. The sole purpose of this team is to make financing more accessible to women-owned businesses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Vanua Finance team will be fully operational in June 2024 and will start off by using existing Merchant Finance products to serve resource owners. New products, especially for resource owners, will be rolled out to the market over the next three months to six months to manage the resource owners' current demand for financing.

Merchant Finance have already started focusing on resource owners, especially those planning to do land subdivision and have built a strong portfolio. The list is expected to grow as the Vanua Finance team spends more time with the resource owners. Merchant Finance has approved funding for three subdivision projects in the last month and more to be approved in the coming month.

The Marama Finance team will be fully operational in June 2024. More gender specific products will be rolled out to the market over the next three to six months.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, holistic approach is required to improve the livelihood of success for MSMEs and resource owners' business. Capacity building is one aspect, and we also need to address monitoring and reporting functions. The Provincial Council Office, through the Roko Tui, the Mata ni Tikina and the Turaga Ni Koro will be tasked with additional responsibilities of monitoring and reporting of iTaukei and resource owners' businesses in their own districts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Centre for Appropriate Technology and Development (CATD) in

Nadave will be enhanced to provide capacity building for resource owners running businesses, and also for the Provincial Office and their delegates.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the review of the iTaukei Administration which has commenced will ensure that the appropriate infrastructure is put in place for them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude and as alluded by honourable Tuiwailevu, our Solesolevaki Framework ensures that the public and the private sector collaborate, and we will continue to embed this in our work because we need to improve the economic contributions of the iTaukei to our national economy. *Vinaka vakalevu*, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Rising Cases of Suicide in Fiji

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, life is a journey of self-discovery, a journey where we seek to find a purpose, a purpose where we were destined for. There will be good days and there will be bad days. There will be days where we will win, and then there will be days where we will not win. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it all comes down to how we take our failures. Many learn from them, and many are suppressed by their own failures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, failures and resentment take a toll on our mental health. Mental health is a state of successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with other people and the ability to adapt to change to cope with adversity. You never know who might be the people who are affected, who are suffering, because they are emotionally unstable, who are hallucinating and hearing voices in their own heads, who are having dark thoughts and those who have anxiety and panic attacks.

People who experience depression and mental illness are more likely to suicide and this is why, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there should be more talk and more dialogue to normalise that these issues exist in our societies, especially for younger generations who have been victims to suicides.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it can be stated that globalisation is creating a significant toll on mental health worldwide. I would like to share some of the case studies that have been sent by various people in Fiji to me or some of the ways they have felt neglected, disappointed at a disadvantage, depressed, and even been the victims of domestic violence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the first case is where this person says, “I grew up feeling that I was neglected by my parents. I felt like I was not their favourite child. Now, that I am a parent myself, I am not repeating the same mistakes my parents made.” But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a two-way street over here. Cases of children facing neglect from an early age, there can be various reasons but on the other hand, parenting is not an easy task and no parent graduates with a degree to become a parent. Some things are done well, and some are not.

The second case, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is where a 65-year-old lady shares with me, “We did everything for our children, coming from an average family. But now, at this old age, they do not even call us or visit us”. Sir, parents and children share a very beautiful relationship, and we need to realise that both the sides need to communicate with each other and communicate to understand and clear misunderstandings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other case is where a child gets bullied in school and gets into fights and does other wrong things in peer pressure. There are people who can relate where they have been bullied in schools, universities and in their workplaces.

Another case here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is where a youth shares with me, “My parents had high academic expectations from me. I got scolded at and beaten if I did not score the highest in my class. I wanted to do marine biology, but I was forced to become an engineer. I hate my job. I wake up every day and I have to go and do what I am not passionate about. I feel like I am dying from inside.” Sir, one thing to note, is that an increasing factor in youth suicide in Fiji seems to be parental expectations for academic achievement and students feeling that they have failed their parents if they do not succeed, as this was stated by the Ministry of Health.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other case is the ability to endure toxic relationships and be victims of domestic violence. A lady shares with me and says, “I have endured domestic violence up to the fifth year of my love marriage. I have two kids. Sometimes I want to kill myself, but then, I cannot leave my children with this drunkard. I have tried leaving, but he would not let me. I have frustration boiling in within me and, honestly, it feels like a disease. It feels like I am being eaten from inside”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other case here is where a youth shares with me that she started dating in her first year of university. After seven months, her partner changed. She said, “He became really possessive and aggressive. I could not talk to anyone, not even to my own friends, or my brothers and sisters. When I left him, he would blackmail me for our personal and private photos, and I could not sleep for days. I felt helpless, ashamed and fearful. I could not even study. He would stop me in public or come and scream my name outside my hostel”.

The last case, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is where someone has shared with me and said, “I was internally broken. I thought getting into a relationship would fix me, and at the end of the new relationship, I broke him, and I made a hero into a villain.” So, if in doubt, is it important to check it out and the best approach is to communicate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are about 700,000 cases recorded globally. It is the youth between 15 years to 29 years, who have been the victims of cases the most. Fiji has a worryingly high case of suicide cases and in Fiji, the youngest person who committed suicide was a seven-year-old child. So, it is a worrying factor for the younger generations of our country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the helplines available today are –

1. Empower Pacific 24/7 Counselling Helpline 5626;
2. National Crisis Toll Free line;
3. Suicide Prevention 1543;
4. Child Helpline Fiji 1325;
5. Fiji National Domestic Violence Helpline 156; and
6. Lifeline Fiji 1543.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to tell these people, “All of you even have the numbers of us Members of Parliament, reach out, call us, because your problem is our problem, and through collective action, we will be able to combat this.”

Even though mental health is a significant part of our life, it is considered taboo to openly talk about. I urge all honourable Members of Parliament to be strong advocates for mental wellbeing and endorse prevention mechanisms. We have to lead by example, and it is only through collective action, we can achieve this.

I shared my views with the honourable Minister for Health earlier this week on this matter, and I am hopeful that there is a multi-sectoral approach from Government and a change of mindset in our society, which is key to make mental wellbeing and suicide prevention a high priority on Fiji’s

health agenda.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to tell the younger generation and the people who are suffering from high stress, depression, mental health issues and suicidal tendencies, that it is a matter of perception. When faced with a problem, challenge and stress, I would like to share in this august Parliament what a teacher once told me in high school, who said, “Rinesh, be so prepared that the problem is afraid to be addressed by you”, and that has stuck with me, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

One must remember that carbon, under high pressure, turns into diamond. There is always a way and impossible is nothing, but giving up on yourself and your life is not one. Be ambitious, but not be overly ambitious.

Burnouts will wear you out and slow you down. Small consistent steps are necessary for success, but I would say, if one finds being successful is easy, remaining successful is the ability to deal with stress, pressure and how one adapts to situations and challenges.

When it comes to relationships, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the virtue of patience is important and communicating to understand. At times, when someone is not understanding something, usually when I try to explain something to my Mum, I have to explain it to her in a way that she understands. So, one can try and communicate in a way that other members absorb or take in that information.

To the younger generations, do not be carried away by the likes, comments and shares you get on social media. Social appreciation does not really mean those people are really for you. If you want to know who stands by you, see that on a bad or rainy day.

The greatest wealth, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is having a healthy body, peaceful mind and the right people in your life. Rest, reset, restart, refocus as many times as you need, but ending your life is not a solution and our young people are being victims to this societal issue, Sir. So, indulge yourself with nature, start backyard farming and gardening, have pets, communicate with your loved ones and develop good habits of working out and getting seven to eight hours of sleep everyday, as these are some of the best long-term solutions for a healthier mind and life.

With that being said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am looking forward to hearing the honourable Minister’s response and initiatives. *Vinaka*.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the End of the Week Statement by honourable Sharma on the topic of Rising Cases of Suicide in Fiji. It is, indeed, a good topic to discuss, especially within the walls of Parliamentary Chambers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, ‘Creating Hope Through Action’ was the triennial theme for the World Suicide Prevention Day for the last three years, and it is commemorated on 10th September every year. The theme is a reminder that suicide is preventable, not inevitable, and it inspire the belief that our actions, no matter how big or small, can provide hope and positive directions to those who are struggling with suicidal thoughts.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO)’s *‘LIVE LIFE: An Implementation Guide for Suicide Prevention in Countries’*, any death by suicide is a deeply sad occasion. It is extremely painful for the close family members and friends left behind who cannot understand why it happened. Inevitably, their sadness is multiplied as they ask themselves, “What could they have done to prevent the untimely death”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, WHO estimates that 700,000 persons die by suicide each year globally, as

alluded to by honourable Sharma, and 77 percent all suicide occur in low middle income countries. Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death amongst 15 year old to 29 year old worldwide and each one is a strategy with a far reaching impact of families, friends and communities.

At the global front, reducing the global suicide mortality rate by one-third by 2030 is both, an indicator and a target - the only one for the mental health under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and, indeed, WHO's Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2030. Current assessment suggests that the world is not on track to reach the 2030 suicide reduction target. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the WHO is encouraging countries to take action to prevent suicide through a comprehensive national suicide prevention strategy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for Fiji, the suicide and attempted suicide statistics gathered by the Fiji Police Force in the last six years from 2016 to 2021, revealed a total of 1,476 suicide and attempted cases and deaths, an average of 246 cases per year, with about half the number leading to deaths. The highest number of suicide and attempted suicide cases were recorded in 2019 with 244 cases, and the Western Division recorded the most cases every year for the last six years.

We cannot and must not ignore suicide. The Ministry of Health and Medical Services has placed suicide prevention high on its agenda and it is committed to transforming its efforts to implement effective actions to prevent suicide. These efforts are aligned to the SDG targets and the WHO's Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan for reducing the global suicide mortality rate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has implemented several measures to address and prevent suicide, reflecting a comprehensive and community-based approach to mental health and suicide prevention. One is on policy and strategies. Existing high level policy, such as Mental Health Act 2010, the Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Policy 2015 and hospital-based counselling standards, guide the national efforts in addressing mental health issues and suicide prevention in Fiji. These policies aim to create its supportive environment where mental health is openly discussed and addressed. The Ministry will be reviewing and updating these policies to address the ever-changing mental health landscapes in Fiji.

On governance and collaboration, the National Committee on the Prevention of Suicide which is chaired by the Minister for Health and Medical Services provides the platform for high level multi-stakeholder's collaboration with community stakeholders, interest groups and Government. This collaboration helps to address stigma related to mental health and promotes transparency to an open discussion about suicide and its prevention.

The National Mental Health Team, under the Wellness and NCD Division within the Ministry, plays a pivotal role in promoting mental health wellness and training healthcare professionals. They have trained nearly 1,000 nurses and doctors, and more than 500 Civil Servants and members of the civil society organisations across the country on suicide prevention strategies and mental health, focussing on promoting positive coping mechanisms and health seeking behaviours.

On Crisis Helplines, as alluded also by honourable Sharma, there are several toll free helplines that have been developed and are now available for those in need of psychological support, including the Lifeline Fiji 1543, Child Help Line Fiji 1325, Empower Pacific 24/7 Counselling Helpline 5626.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we could not have done this without the continuous support of our CSOs and Community Programmes. A number of CSO, such as Empower Pacific, Lifeline Fiji, Mending Minds Foundation, Building Innate Resilience Through Hearts (BIRTH) Fiji, Psychiatric Survivors

Association, Medical Services Pacific, Fiji Cancer Society and Diabetes Fiji work closely with the Ministry of Health and Medical Services in focusing and supporting the identification of individuals at risk, increasing help-seeking behaviour and ensuring access to effective mental healthcare and other supportive services. They also emphasise post-intervention support, reducing access to means of suicide, enhancing life skills, resilience and promoting social connectedness.

On awareness and education, annual events, like the World Suicide Prevention Day, the Mental Health Day and the Mental Health Month help raise awareness about suicide and mental health issues.

On Health Promoting Schools (HPS), one of the pillars of HPS Policy is the Mental Health Pillar and this allows the focus on good mental health practices in schools.

On the Substance Abuse and Advisory Council (SAAC) under the Ministry of Education and established under the Substance Abuse Advisory Council Act 1998, it provides the framework for targeting interventions with regards to substances in learning environments and promoting substance free learning environment.

On capacity building and accreditation, the Ministry has worked closely with our training institutions, in particular, the Fiji National University (FNU), in the training of our health workers in the field of psychiatry and mental health. The University has delivered many mental health courses that help to build the capacity of our healthcare workers and recently started to offer the Postgraduate Master of Medicine in Psychiatry Degree, which is a significant achievement by the University.

Sir, one cannot forget to mention St. Giles - our national referral hospital for mental health disorders. The St. Giles Hospital works in coordination with three Stress Management Wards in Suva, Lautoka and Labasa, and other hospitals at primary healthcare centres for early detection and appropriate intervention for patients visiting any health facilities. Sir, this coordinated action also helps patients who are recovering after a suicidal attempt, in terms of finding possible causes of the attempt and addressing it appropriately so as to prevent any future attempts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these measures reflect Fiji's commitment in tackling suicide through a multi-faceted approach, simply means that more people should know about it, talk about it and do something about it. The new theme for the World Suicide Prevention Day for the next three years from 2024 to 2026 is 'Change the Narrative is a call to action to "Start the Conversation"'.

With targeted mental health strategies, good health promotions, well-trained health workforce and a thorough effective community engagement, we can improve suicide awareness, breakdown the stigma and begin to reduce the rate of suicide in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my seat, I would like to highlight my experience as a young doctor, straight after graduating and into internship. So, internship period is a period where you are tested to witness and experience attempted suicide patients who are calling for help after they have deliberately burned themselves or ingested some harmful chemicals. Sir, it is a sight no one wants to see. Therefore, I urge all honourable Members of this august Parliament and those who are listening that suicide prevention is a responsibility for all of us here in Fiji. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

MR. SPEAKER.- *Vinaka vakalevu*, honourable Minister for Health. I must apologise for announcing honourable Tabuya's name because that appeared on my speaking notes.

Girmit Commemoration 2024

HON. S. KIRAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and all those who are watching today's proceedings; *sab ko mera Pranam, ni sa bula vinaka saka.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to commemorate the arrival of 60,553 indentured labourers between 1879 and 1916, the Coalition Government has declared Girmit Day as national holiday. This year, we organised a Girmit Mela in Lautoka from 11th May-13th May at Fiji Girmit Centre.

The theme of this year's Girmit commemoration was the 'Journey of Girmit Descendants in Building a New Fiji', acknowledging the journey of descendants in different fields of work and the influence on the fabric of our society. The programme was organised by Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry under the leadership of the honourable Minister and Permanent Secretary, Mr. Yogesh Karan, and his staff. I was asked to Chair the Programme's Committee to support their staff and Working Committee based in the West.

Taking the national programme to the Western Division was significant, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as many descendants of Girmityas settled in the West, to restart their lives after the end of the Girmit era. After completing their indenture, many could not go back to India for many, many different reasons. Those who chose to stay could access land from the Colonial Sugar Refinery (CSR) company but they were restricted on what they could plant.

Mr. Speaker, as a result, many of the settlers negotiated with chiefs to gain or access land for farming. We learned through a Girmitya elder who resided in Vuda that *Na Momo na Tui Vuda*, allowed many settlers to access land in early 1900s. In the writings, we also found that Girmityas who made Fiji their home had learnt the language and protocols well and had developed strong ties with the landowners.

It was important to acknowledge the custodians of the land before we begin the Girmit programme. On Friday evening of 10th May, we organised our *vakavinavinaka* ceremony to honour and thank the chiefs, and *Bose ni Momo* was represented by the *Tui Nawaka*, Ratu Joeli Bulu; the *Taukei Navo*, Ratu Meli Saukuru; *Taukei Vidilo*, Ratu Viliame Bouwalu; and the *Matanivanua nodra na Turaga na Tui Naviti*, Sikeli Molase. It was a beautiful event where, after the formal ceremony, a *talanoa* allowed for interaction. We ended the evening with a meal and entertainment, a *meke* brought by *Tui Nawaka*, South Indian dance and National Youth Band was present, that provided entertainment in all three languages.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those who understand our culture and tradition will know that we treat our guests with deep respect, and we seek forgiveness at the end of any such event in case we have erred in any way, that may have offended them or made them uncomfortable. When we hold prayers in our culture, our priests tells us to seek forgiveness of our parents and community at large in case we have hurt them, either intentionally or unintentionally. That is our tradition, Mr. Speaker, Sir. And our *matanivanua*, Mr. Sundressan Chetty from Tavua, also offered his apology during the closure of the ceremony.

The proceedings have been aired on various national TV channels, including the Fiji Government *Facebook* page. This event has been misinterpreted, deliberately or otherwise, as a national apology, on behalf of descendants of Girmityas. I have seen a rambling *Facebook* post by honourable Koya and similar comments by some of his colleagues, that I had led a national apology on behalf of indentured labourers seeking forgiveness from the chiefs in a *matanigasau* ceremony.

This is false for the reasons I have just stated.

Why do some politicians become fearful and insecure when there is any interaction between the two ethnic groups, where we try to look at and do things differently, and begin a deeper process of communication? At times, we are ridiculed and told we are naive and unrealistic, even that we are selling out our ethnic community. Why is that, Mr. Speaker, Sir?

And it is also so interesting that these attacks have all been heaped on a woman leader. I was no more or less responsible for these events than others, including the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry. But it appears that it is easier just to attack a woman MP, perhaps so she can be blamed for showing weakness. I am disgusted that honourable Members of this Parliament instigated mass cyber-bullying with their deliberate lies. It is little wonder that women do not want to stand for politics in our country Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had a government that for 16 years, said nothing about ethnic relations. Its policy was to ignore ethnic differences and simply say, “we are all Fijians”. We were not allowed even to know the ethnic background of our population, Sir. This was a shortsighted and ignorant policy. In every country in the world, there are people of different ethnic groups. Many of these countries do multiculturalism well. They understand the importance of celebrating diversity and communicating with each other about our different languages, customs and cultures, to improve understanding. Commemorating national days like, *Girmit* and Ratu Sukuna, allows us this opportunity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is also important for those of us in the minority to recognise and acknowledge all that have been done for us by the majority community. Something many descendants of *Girmitiyas* may not think about is that the *vanua* and Chiefs have a generous heart. They call us ‘*vasu*’ in their own context.

A *vasu* is someone from maternal links and have no restrictions in observing protocols. Yes, there have been times of tension, deep racism and distress we cannot deny this, nor should we forget the painful lessons such experiences have taught us. Our history is marred by political upheavals of the last 37 years. But it is also important that we remember that for more than a century, our ancestors have lived here through the support of the people of the land.

One has to read ‘*Fiji - A Love Story*’ by the late former Ambassador Ajay Singh, who wrote how his grandmother was helped by a Fijian Chief of Ra when she was in distress. Listen to the story of businessman, Ben Naidu, when his grandfather was nursed by women from Sawaieke in Gau and nurtured for 10 years by an *iTaukei* family before being returned to his own. Read the narratives of the rescue of Syria wreck and you will discover the political history of the last 40 years, does not define our relationships, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is important that as we honour our *Girmitiyas*, we also honour the relationships and support they received in settling in Fiji.

It is time we look forward with excitement and anticipation about what our new political environment can offer us in exploration of each other’s ethnic identities, our language, our culture and customs. Only in this way, Mr. Speaker, Sir, can we truly become one nation. I am proud of the initiatives of our Government in this space. It is a real shame that there are honourable Members in this Parliament who use misinformation and bigotry to try and derail these.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S. KIRAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have been asked by all and sundry, who am I to represent Indo-Fijian people in what I say and do. During the mayhem of 2000, I was one of the few

who went to most of the areas impacted, and I also took the time to understand the different ethnic tensions over the last 20 years. So, I say to those whose ill-informed criticisms try to drive a wedge between our communities, learn your history. To air your insecurities and hate, find other avenues rather than ethnic relations.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the three-day Girit event at Lautoka's Girit Centre was a very well attended and a great success. Many young and older artists from different part of the West showcase their drama, folk songs, poetry and participated in sports that was organised. A carnival atmosphere was created by many local artists and musicians from India through the courtesy of the Indian Government. I wish to thank honourable Minister for Youth and Sports and his Band that coloured the events with their Hindi numbers they learnt within a few days.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to express gratitude to His Excellency the President of Fiji, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere, for gracing the occasion. It was an emotional moment for many recipients of Girit descendants' awards, including Mata Gangamma Ji from Solovi in Nadi, who is 108 years old.

I wish to thank the Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers who were present most of the days of the event. I wish to acknowledge the honourable Assistant Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management, for officiating in Labasa events, and honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government, for officiating at Savusavu events, the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs, the sugar sector, all artist, exhibitors, sponsors, media organisations and all those who participated in the event, including various Government Departments, Archives and the Fiji Museum, who all worked hard to make the event a great success.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have much to do to make multiculturalism in Fiji not just the norm, but a force for good and a way to capitalise our natural development, and I urge every MP and every citizen of our country to be generous in spirit and to support us as we embark on a new path for ethnic relations in Fiji. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Honourable Opposition Member interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- You listen to me. I am going to....

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you very much for giving me the chance to address Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Wait! I have not given you the floor.

(Laughter)

That is the problem of them continuing with their running commentary.

I have not given you the floor yet. I was about to address you, but anyway, since you have stood up, I will give you the floor now.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am the last speaker, I suppose. Honourable Bulitavu is saying, "just be short and sweet". But I love to say one thing, despite my extending invitation to the Opposition to come to the all the celebrations, no one turned up.

HON. K.K. LAL.- You gave the wrong invitation!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, one alphabetical error does not mean your name changes. Anyway, look, if they keep on interjecting, I will take long, I will take 20 minutes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the End of the Week Statement by honourable Kiran on the update and the significance of the recently celebrated National Girit Day that was held for the three days from 11th May, 2024 to 13th May, 2024. The three-day event was held at the Lautoka Girit Centre, while the two half-day events was organised at Subrail Park in Labasa and Savusavu.

At the outset, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to confirm that the National Girit Day event this year was very successful, and this was attested by honourable Kiran earlier.

(Honourable Opposition Member interjects)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Keep quiet! When a senior person speaks, keep quite!

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reason for the successful event are numerous. Firstly, the event was led by a very capable person, the honourable Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection, who was the Chairperson of this event. With the vast experience she has in managing the projects and events, the honourable Assistant Minister provided majestic leadership, guidance and a direct involvement in the planning, organising and executing of the three-day event in Lautoka. Despite her busy schedule, she took her valuable time to prioritise this event. Mr. Speaker, Sir, on behalf of my Ministry, I wish to thank her wholeheartedly for leading the success of this event, given that the Ministry of Mult-Ethnic is a relatively new ministry with limited staff.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the second reason of the success was the role of the hardworking committee members, who were set up prior to the event in Lautoka, Labasa and Savusavu. The Lautoka committee was led by Mr. Selva Nandan, the Savusavu committee was led by Mr. Shankar Singh and the Labasa committee was led by Mr. Vinesh Prasad. These gentlemen worked tirelessly with the committee members to ensure that everything was ready before the event proper. All the committee members dedicated their time on a volunteer basis, and I was amazed by their dedication and commitment. On the same note, I wish to thank the volunteers who helped us in making this event successful in the three locations of Lautoka, Labasa and Savusavu.

The other reason of success, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was the service provided by the National Archives, which allowed the Girit descendants in the Western Division to identify their ancestry in India. There is a very popular site and I wish to thank the National Archives for providing this service.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the event, the younger generation of the Girit descendants were able to see the artifacts and jewellery that were brought from India. The Ministry of Agriculture displayed spices, cooking utensils, crops and farming tools that were introduced by the Girit descendants. The Ministry of Forestry showcased some of the plants that were introduced by the *Girmitiyas*, and this was another reason for the success of the Girit event, and I am grateful for both Ministries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the patrons witnessed a great performance by around 60 artists related to

Girmit both, local artists and artists from India. I wish to thank the Indian Government for bringing them over to Fiji, especially for the Girmit event. In both, Labasa and Savusavu, there were 20 items from the different local groups that performed various items on Girmit, and I wish to pay my gratitude to them.

The patrons also witnessed some great performance by the National Youth Band where we witnessed iTaukei youngsters singing beautiful Hindi songs. Indeed, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this attracted a good crowd. I wish to thank the Ministry of Youth for this stage performance, and I would like to see them perform more in my Ministry's social cohesion events in the future.

The highlight of the Girmit, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was the awards that were bestowed to the Girmit descendants of 80 years and above by our President, His Excellency Ratu Viliame Maivalili Katonivere, who was the Chief Guest on Monday, 13th May, 2024. That was an emotional moment for the recipients and family members. I am sure the honourable Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection will agree with this. I wish to thank His Excellency for his time to be the Chief Guest.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to state that the funds for this year's Girmit Day event in Lautoka, Suva, Labasa and Savusavu has been well accounted for by my Ministry. I wish to clearly inform this Parliament that no funds were disbursed to any individual or organisation prior to the event, and all financial and procurement rules of the Government were followed, including the requirements for three quotations.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- That is the way to go, honourable Minister.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- On that note, I wish to thank everyone for making this year's Girmit Day event successful and I support the honourable Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection for her End of the Week Statement on the update and significance of the recently celebrated National Girmit Holiday. *Vinaka*.

MR. SPEAKER.- For the information of honourable Members, I received notification from the Chairperson of the Special Committee on Emoluments to move a motion pertaining to the Committee's Report which was tabled on Wednesday, 22nd May, 2024.

The Business Committee has agreed to allow the Chairperson to move her motion today, and in that respect, honourable Members, a procedural suspension motion must be moved. I now call upon the Leader of the Government in Parliament to move his motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

HON. RO. F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, under Standing Order 6, I move:

That so much of Standing Order 34 be suspended so as to allow the Chairperson of the Special Committee on Emoluments to move her motion today.

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

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as indicated in Standing Order 6(1), and I quote: "A Standing Order may be suspended in whole or in part only by leave of Parliament. That I results in Standing Order 6(2), and I quote: "...which will result in the suspending of a Standing Order in whole or in part, must not be moved except with the Speaker's permission..." We have done that.

Then Standing Order 6(3) and (4) states, I quote:

(3) “No amendment to a suspension motion may be moved and no debate is allowed on it.

(4) If Parliament grants leave on a suspension motion, the Standing Order concerned is suspended.”

That is what we are putting into effect in order to suspend Standing Order 34, which specifically guides us on Parliament business.

When you look at Standing Order 34 in terms of the motions, they are either moved under Clause(1)(n) where it states: “motions moved by members of the Business Committee that relate to sittings and Parliament business”, or under Clause 1(o): “motions for which notice has been given”, or under Clause2(a): “the Business Committee determines otherwise”, and that was the case in terms of the motion I am moving today. Thank you.

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

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have no further comments to add.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

REVIEW OF SALARIES AND ALLOWANCE – MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT AND EXECUTIVE OFFICE

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Wednesday, 22nd May, 2024, and sections 3, 12 and 13 of the Parliamentary Remunerations Act 2014, I move:

That Parliament debates and approves the recommendations in the Report of the Special Committee on Emoluments which was tabled on Wednesday, 22nd May, 2024, and that this determination to take effect from 1st August, 2024 and expire on 31st December, 2024.

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

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank you for giving me this opportunity to elaborate on the Committee’s Report and the recommendations contained in the Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to reiterate in this Parliament that the Special Committee on Emoluments was formed, firstly, by a resolution of Parliament on Wednesday, 12th July, 2023 and that was resolved unanimously. As I had alluded to during the tabling of the Emolument’s Committee Report on Wednesday, 22nd May, 2024, due to the non-inclusion of other Offices such as the Office of the President and Office of the Speaker, as well as the review of the Parliamentary Retirement Allowances Act 1989, an amendment motion was later moved to rectify the anomalies that were previously not included and, again, this was unanimously passed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I had mentioned, a second 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 passed as a resolution of Parliament on Monday, 11th September, 2023. As all honourable Members are aware, during the tabling of the Emoluments Committee Report, the motion was seconded by the Committee Member from the Opposition because this was a bipartisan Report and all Members of the Committee had discussed this together and came up with a final decision, following the discussions and the recommendation from the independent consultant.

The independent consultant, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is an experienced former Parliamentarian from abroad and was hired by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), through the Parliament Support Project, to assist the Emoluments Committee to do an independent analysis and comparisons between the Fijian Parliament and other jurisdictions. The Emoluments Committee met on several occasions and looked at the relevant laws, as well as the report from the consultant, before coming to its final decision.

The Committee also listened to the submissions provided by different political parties represented in Parliament and called for briefing as well from the Pensions Office for the Members of Parliament (MPs) who are based at the honourable Prime Minister's Office. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will now go into the Report, and I will explain, discuss and address some of the decisions taken by the Committee which is as follows.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the discussions or the recommendations on the salaries:

1. Salary of the President

The current salary is \$130,000 and the Committee endorsed from the Consultant's recommendation that it be \$185,000 non-taxable. The Head of State, we believe, deserves a salary that reflects the post, which is both, ceremonial and has legal decision-making authority.

2. Salary of the Prime Minister

The current salary at \$328,750, is now being reduced to \$320,000. I apologise, honourable Prime Minister. The reduction from the previous salary by 2.5 percent is in comparison to the salary of the Chief Justice. Both posts are Heads of Branches of Government – both Judiciary and Executive and have the full authority and responsibility to manage and deliver programming.

3. Salary of Ministers

Currently, we have four Ministers that sit on a different band of salary. The Minister of Finance or the Minister for Economy as stated in the Act, earns \$235,000. The Ministers for Education, Health and Infrastructure earn \$200,000. The remaining Ministers earn \$185,000.

The Consultant recommended that all Ministers earn a salary of \$200,000 and these posts have the capacity to make legally binding decisions and are fully autonomous in their decision-making. It is important to note that this was considered by the Committee, that even some of our Permanent Secretaries are earning more than the Ministers in our Ministries. My Permanent Secretary earns \$190,000 and I have been on a reduced salary for the past three years to \$148,000. Other Permanent Secretaries range from \$190,000 to \$250,000 - a quarter of a million dollars that the Permanent Secretaries earn more than their Ministers.

4. Salary of Assistant Ministers

The Assistant Ministers currently earn \$90,000 and it has been recommended and endorsed that they earn \$120,000, an increase of \$30,000. The Assistant Ministers engaged with the highest and second highest civil servants in their respective Ministries, therefore, they should

receive a salary commensurate. Of course, as you compare it to Permanent Secretaries, it is still quite low. This is what was recommended, and we have endorsed it.

5. Salary of Speaker

Currently sits on \$150,000. It has been recommended and endorsed to earn \$220,000. The Speaker is the Head of the Legislative Branch of Government and, therefore, the role is important, and the salary should reflect the gravitas of the post.

6. Salary of the Leader of the Opposition

Currently earns \$120,000. We have endorsed that he earns \$200,000. This is a constitutional office, and he also acts as the Shadow Prime Minister while representing Fiji in international platforms, along with the Speaker and the Prime Minister.

7. Salary of Members of Parliament

Mr. Speaker, Sir, currently they earn \$50,000. We have recommended and endorsed that they earn \$95,000. Of course, this is almost a double in salary. It is important to note that the last review of Members of Parliament salary was in 2014, which is now 10 years later. This has not been done for 10 years.

Each of these posts involve a significant level of autonomy in decision-making and each has the requirement for legal and policy analysis, and general management skills. Fiji is an open constituency, therefore, all the members who were sworn in as MPs have added responsibilities which is allowed to them to be other office holders, for example, in their own political parties. So, it comes with responsibilities as well to their constituents.

On to the allowances, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the allowances that is currently in the Act for the President so all of those positions, I will be referring to the United Nations Daily Subsistence Allowance (UNDSA). UNDSA x 50 percent + \$300 for the Office of the President. Again, we have seen because of the position that the President holds and the international engagements that he engages in with other Heads of State around the world, we have increased it to 150 percent and remained the \$300 incidental.

The honourable Prime Minister (my apologies again, Sir) currently he is on the UNDSA x 250 percent + \$600 daily allowance and this has been massively reduced. Mr. Speaker, Sir, to UNDSA x 200 percent and no daily incidentals.

The Ministers have all been reduced, Mr. Speaker, Sir, currently the Act says UNDSA x 200 percent + \$500, it has now been slashed to UNDSA x 150 percent.

The Assistant Ministers, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has also been reduced. They are currently on UNDSA x 100 percent + \$300, which is now being reduced to more than half - UNDSA x 125 percent.

The honourable Speaker is currently on UNDSA x 100 percent + \$300 and, again, for being the Head of Legislature, honourable Speaker, with your engagements globally, this has been increased to UNDSA x 200 percent + \$300 incidental.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition is the same as the Ministers; UNDSA x 150 percent.

Members of Parliament, Mr. Speaker, Sir, were at UNDSA x 100 percent + \$200 incidental daily. This has now been recommended and endorsed at UNDSA x 125 percent only, so no daily incidentals.

There are some additional benefits that are being proposed here. For the Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers, the provision of a tax and duty free purchase of a vehicle. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this benefit was in place prior to 2007 and should be reinstated, given the amount of travel incurred in our role, as well as the eligibility would be one vehicle per term.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recommendation about Government Quarters in Suva, the Ministers and Assistant Ministers is recommended to have access to Government Quarters in Suva as a form of accommodation at the same rate as civil servants because according to the Ministry of Finance's Offices Accommodation Unit, officers in the Civil Service stationed temporarily in Suva can access Government Quarters at 10 percent of the market rate. The same benefit should be available to Ministers and Assistant Ministers if they wish to utilise this form of temporary accommodation in Suva.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Speaker of Parliament, as well as the Leader of the Opposition, it is recommended and endorsed that official residency be available for both officers. Prior to 2007, there was an official residence for the Speaker of Parliament, and this should be reinstated. In many jurisdictions in the Commonwealth, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it provides an official residence for the Leader of the Opposition and this benefit should be extended to the Leader of the Opposition here.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the MPs' travel and Committee sitting allowance, the *status quo* remains, there is no change to that. However, the only change is to the accommodation allowance because of the impracticality of the 30 kilometre radius, where it is a 30 kilometres radius in a straight line. We have recommended and it has been endorsed that this 30 kilometres apply by the most direct route by road, but if you are being accommodated outside of your normal place of residence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the constituency allowance of \$15,000 allocated to each MP where currently, it is \$10,000 a year, it is recommended and endorsed that the full amount be given to MPs in order to carry out their constituency work. The initial idea and thought was that the political parties needed funding in order to also operate but as we all know, this allocation is being covered in the yearly budget of \$325,000 per Party and, therefore, this allocation is to go to MPs to be able to have the freedom and the autonomy to decide how they go about their constituency work, so to give the full \$15,000.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, currently, medical and life insurance does not exist, but this should be a benefit not only offered to the Civil Service, but should be extended to all MPs as well, given the duties required for your post and the high risk related to extended travel. If an MP wishes to continue to make premium payments on any life insurance policy after you leave office, then that option is available. But this coverage is a maximum of \$100,000.

Maternity leave, Mr. Speaker, Sir, currently does not exist, but Parliament should establish a system for maternity leave. This is to entice more women to seek elected office, and this should be given in line with the national system for such benefits.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, gadgets that are given to MPs at the beginning of their term to enable them to do their work, it is endorsed that Members are entitled to keep the provided gadgets after the end of the Parliament term.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are allowances now recommended for office holders within Parliament. It is recommended and endorsed that the Deputy Speaker of Parliament receive an annual allowance of \$15,000, because it is a significant role in the parliamentary office, for the Deputy Speaker presides in the absence of the Speaker.

It is also proposed that the Leader of the Government in Parliament receive an annual allowance of \$7,000. The Leader of the Government in Parliament is a key player in organising and coordinating the business of Government for any parliamentary sitting and in other parliamentary events. The Leader of the Government in Parliament also has the procedural role during sitting days, and also in important parliamentary days, such as the Opening of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is endorsed that the Party Whips be given \$5,000 allowance annually. This particular position is significant in the daily functioning and during Parliament sitting, and also for organising the Members for any parliamentary duties.

The Deputy Whip, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has been endorsed to receive a \$3,000 yearly allowance. The Deputy Whip assists the Whips in fulfilling their roles and duties.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now go on to the review of the Parliamentary Retirement Allowances Act 1989. Since July 2018, there have not been any substantial changes to this Act. The Committee, through its deliberations, recommended that there should be amendments made to the Act, as to align with the evolving economic status and social practice of the country.

The Committee has collectively made the following recommendations, and we support the recommendations by the Consultant in this report:

Eligibility for the Maximum Years of Service

Currently, it sits at 15 years. This has now been changed or reduced to 12 years. This is because the terms of Parliament now stand at four years. So, instead of the five years in the previous Governments, so that was three terms, it is now four years, so 12 years is consistent.

Double Dipping Issue

In the Act, it is not clear as to whether or not an MP who retires or leaves Parliament, receives an allowance and then subsequently, when they get re-elected can collect the allowance while also holding that post.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have revised the Act to prevent an MP who, returns to Service in Parliament, from receiving that allowance while currently serving.

Severe Disability

There is no provision, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for anyone holding that has a severe disability, who becomes severely disabled before reaching the age of 55 years, to apply for and receive the full allowance. And we are recommending that the new Act should allow that former MPs with severe disability to receive full allowance prior to 55 years of age.

Ineligibility for Conviction

Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Act is unclear as to whether or not a former MP who is eligible for this allowance would be entitled if they were to serve a sentence for bribery, corruption, or such a conviction, will make the former member ineligible permanently. A secondary question is whether or not a conviction for bribery or corruption should be linked to the member's work as an elected official, or if any conviction, no matter the relevance to the elected post, is enough to make a former member ineligible for allowance?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it has been recommended that if the former MP is convicted of bribery or corruption related to their time as an MP, then they will lose the retirement allowance permanently.

Otherwise, they lose the allowance while they serve their sentence. So, this needs to be clarified and something to be discussed further.

Spousal Eligibility

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Act is clear, only a person who was a spouse to a member while they were elected is eligible for the reduced rate of allowance after the member's death. However, if the member remarries after retiring and the first spouse pre-deceases the member, should the second, or third, or fourth, or fifth spouse have a right to a portion of the allowance?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no change to the current rules. Allowing second or post-MP's spouses to receive an allowance will create an unnecessary level of anxiety and complexity to the allocation of allowances. Spouses who were married to an MP when the MP was serving in office are entitled to a constructive trust and, therefore, some of the allowance earned by the MP.

Administrator for Retirement Allowances

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Act defines the Administrator as the Secretary to Cabinet, or some other person appointed by the Prime Minister. However, as the allowance is for MPs and most elected officials, should the Administrator be a staff person of Parliament?

Recommending, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we revise the Act to designate the Secretary-General to Parliament as the Administrator of Retirement Allowance.

Qualifying Salary

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the current Act, the salary that is the basis for calculating the retirement allowance is the salary the MP was receiving in their final year of elected office. This can result in an MP who has had a larger income, for example, for being a Minister or Leader of the Opposition, and then reverts back to a singular role as an MP, their allowance is calculated, if they exit Parliament, based on the salary of an MP, as this was the last salary. As I had mentioned, it is not based on the highest salary received by the MP, which has an impact on the final calculation of the retirement allowance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are proposing that the new Act should calculate the annual salary for allowance purposes based on an average of the three best years of the higher salary in which the former Member earned.

Retroactivity

Mr. Speaker, Sir, currently the Act has two application dates - the original from 1989 which states that the allowance is only eligible to a member who has been an MP since 1970 and has attained four years of service. The Act was amended in 2016 to reflect the new 2013 Constitution in which MPs elected under that Constitution may only serve three years and six months for the completion of one term in office. If the formula or other aspects of retirement allowance are amended, should the Act apply to those who are already receiving an allowance, or only to those who will receive their retirement allowance in the future under a new scheme?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is our recommendation that any retroactive application of legislation is considered bad form. In this case, all new provisions should apply to those who are currently sitting MPs, and any subsequent elected MPs, moving forward from the date of the promulgation of the new Act.

Re-drafting

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have mentioned, this is quite an old Act. Since that time, the format and quality of legal drafting have evolved, and the question we ask was, does the Act need to be fully re-

written to reflect these new drafting standards and to make the Act more easily interpreted and understood by beneficiaries?

It is our recommendation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we draft a completely new Act.

Allowance as a Source of Income

Currently, the Act is silent as to whether or not the retirement allowance assigned to a former MP or person who held a qualifying post is considered ‘income’ for purposes of using such an allowance to secure debt or a loan by the former MP. Now, *de facto*, the allowance is not considered income and, therefore, is not assignable, except for specific exceptions, and cannot be used as collateral or security for a loan or other debt instrument. It should also be noted that the allowance is tax free, according to the Act and, thus, is not considered income for tax purposes.

This needs to be clarified in the Act, Mr. Speaker, it needs to be specified that the retirement allowance is not income and cannot be assigned or a lien placed upon it, except as related to debts owed to the State, or for settling a divorce, or to provide child support.

Eligibility for Qualifying Posts

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the remuneration scheme for MPs is amended to separate salaries for MPs from additional salaries for Ministers, Assistant Ministers and other leadership posts in Parliament, should the Parliamentary Retirement Allowances Act apply to only MPs and the salary attained as an MP? If so, what additional allowance, if any, should be allocated for those who assume such leadership posts in Government and Parliament, in addition to their MP duties?

Mr. Speaker, assuming that the remuneration scheme is amended to have all MPs receive an MP salary, and those who take on leadership posts to receive a separate allowance for that work, it is recommended that the new Act only apply to MPs, Leader of the Opposition and Speaker.

Eligibility for Minimum Time Served

Mr. Speaker, the Act allows for two separate minimum levels of service for those who hold a qualifying post. For those who serve from 1970 to December 2006, the minimum year of service is four years, equivalent to one term. For those elected after 2014, the minimum time served to be eligible for an allowance is three years and six months, equivalent to one term. Mr. Speaker, Sir, should a former MP be eligible for an allowance who may have served for a period shorter than that term – they have come in for a month, for a day, for a year, what should apply?

We are recommending, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the new Act should state that any MP who has served in Parliament for any amount of time should be eligible to the retirement allowance.

Eligibility – Maximum Time Served

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have already mentioned that it is 12 years, instead of 15 years, and I had stated why.

Eligibility Age at Retirement

Mr. Speaker, this was quite a sore point and I know this was for younger MPs who are under 40 when they came into Parliament. The Act allows for a full allowance when you have attained 55 and for those from 40 to 55, you have a pro-rated basis.

Mr. Speaker, the Committee is recommending that it should reflect a broader scope of who is eligible for retirement allowance. So, an MP over 55 years receives the full amount. Any MP between 40 years and 55 years has a pro-rated allowance, and any MP under the age of 40 years receives 3.33 percent less than the age category of 40 years to 55 years. So, they are receiving something, it is not

a full amount because we acknowledge the workable years left when you are younger.

Independent Review Process

Mr. Speaker, we also recommend that there be an independent review process, moving forward. We recommend that an Independent Remuneration and Allowances Tribunal be established to make the determinations with regards to MP benefits and salary.

Allowance Formula

Mr. Speaker, the current formula is quite complicated. I finally grasped it, so we need to simply it. But we are recommending that the formula to be calculated for the allowance for an MP, as follows – 1/12 years x average annual salary based on the best three years, the highest salaries you received, by the number of years of services as an MP. So, simplifying the formula to be calculated.

Mr. Speaker, the Committee agreed that these issues be raised because these are pertinent for honourable Members. I want to also state here that the 20 percent pay cut on all honourable Members that was imposed during COVID-19 is still not restored. So, all these salaries that I have mentioned that are currently under the Act, they are all reduced by 20 percent, and we have been receiving that for the last three years. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we recommend that that be restored also.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, and honourable Members of the Committee, I want to thank our Members. I now request all honourable Members to support the motion and adopt and approve the recommendations in the Report of the Special Committee on Emoluments which was tabled on Wednesday, 22nd May, 2024. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members the floor is now open for debate.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have not prepared anything to say and only to raise my complaints. I know, everyone was going up.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have had some exchanges in the media, as well as the social media, and some members of my Party have been pretty vocal and urging me, and I assured them as Minister responsible for Parliament that I would be guided by my oath which I swore on Christmas Eve 2022. I remind those who are pointing fingers at me and saying that it is not the right time and why am I doing it when I am in Parliament.

My oath, Mr. Speaker, Sir is very simple. I, Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka, being appointed as Prime Minister, swear that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to the Republic of Fiji. And that I will obey, observe, uphold and maintain the Constitution of the Republic of Fiji and all other laws of Fiji, and I solemnly and sincerely promise to uphold my office with honour, dignity and integrity; to be a true and faithful counsellor; not to divulge any secret matter; and I will devote myself the wellbeing of the Republic of Fiji and all Fijians; to protect and promote their rights and well and truly serve the Republic of Fiji and the Office of Prime Minister.

So, those who are in my Party who have been pointing fingers at me and urging me not to do anything, it is not for the Party, I am speaking on behalf of the people of Fiji and all of us are people of Fiji. I am glad that my salary is reduced because I can vote with a free conscience on this one, that I am not looking after my own interest, and I urge all honourable Members to do likewise.

MR. SPEAKER.- *Vinaka vakalevu*, Sir.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to contribute to the motion before us. We know how important and, of course, how sensitive it is as well. But before I go into the motion itself,

I wish to remember the late Pastor Vuli Waqa, I think he had his funeral today, he was well known in athletics, and we do convey our deep condolence and sympathy to the family.

In contributing, I also declare my interest. I have two, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because this affects me and, perhaps, I will speak on behalf of all the Parliamentarians on this side because it affects them as well. I do declare my interest before I proceed further.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot has been said in the social media, comments by political parties who are not in this Parliament and, of course, other stakeholders who have an interest in this issue. That is why I stand here, on behalf of the Parliamentarians of the FijiFirst Party, to also share our thoughts on this issue.

As I have stated from the very beginning, Sir, this is not an easy matter to discuss because it affects us. But at the same time, let us be fair and let us be honest on ourselves as well and I would like to speak on behalf of my Members, particularly, given what we have experienced while we were in Government and, of course, now, in the Opposition. Perhaps, I do not only speak here now, being in the Opposition, but I speak on behalf of Parliamentarians who will come after us, either on that side of Parliament or this side of Parliament because elections will determine which side of Parliament we will sit on and the benefits that do come with it.

We live in a benefit-oriented society, that is a fact. Of course, it is critical that we look at it not only for now, but also for the future. Not only Parliament, but Government as we have always discussed, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has to be seen as an equal employment opportunity provider and, of course, an employer of choice for all Fijians. I hope that the conditions and the environment that is created here will, somehow, set the standard in order for us to entice well-qualified professional people out there in our communities, in the private sector and in the public sector, who have aspirations to be an honourable Member in the future, and this is something that we need to look into as we are deliberating on this issue.

We know for a fact that some have to make sacrifices, on both sides of Parliament, coming from a better job, better conditions, better pay, but being patriotic and passionate about serving for the country, most of us do join this august Parliament as Members of Parliament, but the fact also remains that we are all human beings. We are all part of our community. We have needs, we have wants, some have mortgages, we have relatives, we have our commitments to our churches, and these are all facts of life.

I remember very well, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the advice that you gave me when I first joined Parliament in 2014 when every now and then, so many people are queuing up here. You gave me a very good advice that I will not forget because people do come expecting a lot from you when you come with that beautiful suit, entering this Parliament, and they know that you have a deep pocket. That is a fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir. So, when we are making our contribution, we are considering those issues.

Very briefly, we are just fulfilling the process of Parliament, that is what we have done. It was moved in July 2023. It was again discussed with another motion from the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament in September last year. We are completing that process, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

As the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance specifically stated then and I will not read the *Daily Hansard* that I have here before me, based on the system that was used previously, I do not want to bring that up, let us put it to a Committee, bring independent consultants and in the end, as he specifically stated, it will come back into Parliament and we will vote for it, and

that is exactly what we are doing today. It was initiated by Government for whatever reasons, for whatever motives behind it, it was an initiative of Government. So where do we stand now?

I wish to raise that question to Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We are just simply completing the process and the continuation of that process will depend on the decisions that we will make today.

I thank the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection and also Chairperson of the Committee for the submission. I have been briefed by our Members of the Committee as well. It is unfortunate that perhaps, not all the discussions involved during the deliberations is in the Report and that is where perhaps, listening to her concluding remarks, if continuing discussions and negotiations on some of the pertinent issues that still have not been resolved will continue, that is something that we will forward to. But there were some issues as well that we raised, we understand the democratic process, but it was put to vote, et cetera. We lost out on the vote since, but it is for fairness sake and transparency, it would have been good, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if all the deliberations, the discussions and the decisions are reflected in the Report because we are concerned, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before this debate takes place today, information is already out in the social media. We are concerned, that is not fair, Sir. It was a decision of Government, all the Parties on the other side are part of Government, we in here are also part of the institution in here, but only FijiFirst Party's contribution in the Committee was out there in the public media.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to raise here my disappointment and I also wish to raise my concern. It is unfair, Sir. It has been pulled out, again, perhaps by the National Federation Party. As I have stated this is your initiative, this is the process that we are completing. It is unfair when our proposals were only put up as if all the decisions in terms of salary, allowances, et cetera, all came from FijiFirst.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to raise that issue. I am disappointed and I am concerned because that should not happen. Where is the confidentiality of the processes that we have. It is out in the public, Mr. Speaker, Sir, so that to me is very concerning.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is part of the Report.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will talk on our submission because it was out there in the media. This is why I chose to speak. I was not comfortable because, as I have stated, I have declared my interest, but I have to speak on behalf of our Parliamentarians. We did a very thorough research before we took our presentation to the Committee. Whether the independent consultant considered that or benchmarked from it, that was entirely up to the Committee and the consultant, and I thank our Members who were involved in our research.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have had some discussions about the Office of the Opposition and the things that need to be addressed in that, but I will go back to the issue. We prepared well before we went to the Committee, as required by the process. We were all to make submissions. The NFP had their submission, People's Alliance had their submission, SODELPA had their submission and so did we. We made our submission, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will not talk about that in detail, we looked at all the other jurisdictions, but the most important thing out of the submission is the base salary for an MP. We discussed that

in Australia, Sir, because in other jurisdictions, you start from the base salary of an MP. Then the other responsibilities are added on to you as an MP, and then the terms and conditions and the benefits come with it. So that is where we should all start off and that is where we also came in, in terms of our recommendations - the base salary for an MP. As I have stated, I am not only speaking now as being here in the Opposition, because come 2026, you will be here on this side of Parliament.

In terms of fairness, that is where we should all start from, and then we looked at other jurisdictions. From there, Assistant Ministers and then Ministers, and then the honourable Prime Minister. In some jurisdictions, they have special salary packages as well for Deputy Prime Ministers, but in our case, that is where we started from - the base salary for our MPs.

I will not repeat what the honourable Chairperson and the Leader of the Committee has already highlighted about the salaries, allowances and other benefits, like tax, and quarters access, but let me say here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, previously, when it was done, we looked at the salary and the other benefits. But now, a lot has been added into this because in terms of housing, you are given a reasonable salary, so then you can look after your housing, your medical, other bills and, of course, communications where we are given all these gadgets. But that was how it was worked out previously.

As I have said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and this is why it would only be fair if the other comments from the other side can also be heard in here and that is why I was insisting that their contributions in the Committee be also included in the Report because that is how we will gauge and be able to judge how the Committee and the independent consultant came up with their final decisions and, of course, the recommendations that are here before us, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the independent consultant, I am told that he was the same one used by UNDP when the Parliament Remunerations Act was drafted way back in 2014. So, in terms of the Report of the Committee, I would say that it is credible because it has gone through the process that was agreed to in the September sitting last year and, of course, that has come back now into Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the question that we have now is, are we going to accept this Report that was initiated by Government? The question of timing has been raised. However, the other question that I would also raise with the honourable Minister of Finance is, how is the Ministry going to implement, subject to the decision of this Parliament today, the recommendations that are in the Report? Are we going to continue to discuss further on some of the recommendations that are here? So, do we have the funds for this, Mr. Speaker, Sir?

As I have always stated, the bottom line is growing the economy. We are still waiting, and I am still waiting, but I am told that the recommendations of the Economic Review Report has come out today, as we are gearing up towards the sitting of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, let me just go back to the submission that we made, particularly on the base salary for MPs. That is, perhaps, what I call a decision that will be strategic as we move forward from here. I know that the honourable Minister for Education experienced this in his three months as an ordinary MP - from a Cabinet post to an ordinary MP, that is what I am talking about because we, on this side are the only MPs who are not Ministers. All on the other side are Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the basics and the strategic decision that we must take today is, the base salary for all MPs. Of course, Sir, we look forward to the decision and the guidance of Government on this motion that is before Parliament.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will try and be brief but before I actually speak about the motion itself and the position that the National Federation Party (NFP) took in terms of our submission, I just want to remind the honourable Leader of the Opposition that he is, sort of, wishy-washy in saying that it is a Government's initiative. I think the initiative came from Parliament and the Opposition Members also agreed that the best way to move forward is to look at an independent Emoluments Committee to address this issue.

On the issue of FijiFirst or NFP's submission getting covered by the media, in fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the honourable Leader of the Opposition's information, the submissions of all the Parties were part of the Report and the moment any report is tabled in Parliament, it is a public document. The media covered NFP's position, FijiFirst's position, it was part of the report.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It was part of the report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now, when the report is out there, any report that goes on that table, is immediately a public document which included all Party submissions. Therefore, the media picked up all the submissions in the social media, including NFP as well. What is wrong with putting your submission and our submission? We put our submission, we put their submission, they want to hide their submission from the public?

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is what they are saying. It was about transparency and accountability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us not get round this and ask, "Who put it there? Why?" Everyone's submission is there, it is part of the report, it is a public document.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- No!

(Hon. P.D. Kumar interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is not a crime for NFP people to pick up FijiFirst's submission and put it out there, or NFP's.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Shame on you!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- And I want to thank the honourable Prime Minister for his contribution about conscience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what I want to say is, on behalf of the five Members of the National Federation Party who are in this Chambers, we made the Party's submission, and the submission went through the Party's Management Board and the Working Committee, and that submission was a directive by the Party.

When the report was presented to Parliament 48 hours ago, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we said very

clearly that the content of the Report is noted, and the debate on the Report will be at a future sitting of Parliament. We looked at the content of the Report, Sir, and we were going to take that Report back to our Management Board and our Working Committee to be able to take a position as far as the Report is concerned and the recommendations in the Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the Committee was formed in Parliament, I said that I want to quit, but that does not mean that the Parliamentary Emolument's Committee itself will make an assessment because the principle is that we cannot determine our own salaries and allowances. The idea, as the honourable Leader of the Opposition said, was to get an independent consultant and, in fact, an independent consultant committee, perhaps, should have made the recommendations to the Emoluments Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as far as our Party's constitution is concerned, we cannot meet the requirements of the Party's constitution section 63(1) and subsection (h) and (i) of the 2013 Constitution because if the Party provides a directive - the Party Management Board and the Working Committee, we cannot go against that until we go back and get their direction. What we are saying is that, of course, we can argue about the increases, the relativity, and I am happy that my salary is going down, but that is another issue. Therefore, we cannot support the recommendations in the Report as it is because we have to go back to our Party, to our Management Board and to our Working Committee, to make the decision.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our position on this matter is in accordance with the directive of the Party and, as I have outlined, this should not, in any way, be construed or misinterpreted in terms of our position and as support to the honourable Prime Minister and to the Coalition Government.

As I have said, and let me repeat this, the honourable Leader of the Opposition cannot shy away from the fact that what he was trying to imply was that this was the Government's initiative, this was the Parliament's initiative, this was the Opposition's initiative...

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Yes, of course.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ...and Parties made their submission. And when the report was presented to this Parliament Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was a good process.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Once the report is made public in Parliament, you expect debate to be on that, and that is our position, Sir. We can argue about the merits and demerits, and I heard what the honourable Leader of the Opposition said.

When we were sitting in the Opposition for eight years, the salaries and the decisions that were made in 2014 before the first sitting of Parliament was made by a decree. That was the last decree, which set the salaries of the Ministers, the Prime Minister, the allowances and for the Opposition. When we had another committee of that Parliament looking at the allowances, et cetera, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you would recall, that we took a different position and we actually voted against the increase in allowances in 2016.

That is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our position and we, at this point in time, cannot support the recommendations of the Report or the Report itself. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to give a short contribution. I thank you for allowing me to speak on this motion and as one of the Committee Members, the only thing

that I would like to raise here and which I was not in consensus with when it came to the Committee as well (unfortunately, that was not reflected in the Report) is the pension issue. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have been representing the youth because I entered Parliament at the age of 30 years. I am into my third term now and I am 40 years old. I think it is discrimination against the youth who are categorised and would not be getting the full pension just because they entered Parliament at a younger age.

We do understand that they have a good number of years to go if they retire from Parliament, but that does not mean that we do not give them the full benefit of what someone can attain after coming into Parliament after the age of 55 years. So, as a youth representative for the past 10 years in Parliament and as a youth MP in this august Parliament, I think it is an injustice, and that is something that needs to be reconsidered.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I request honourable Members in this Parliament and because most of them sitting here are above the age of 55 years, please, let us not discriminate our youth but entice them to come to Parliament. On pro-rata basis, it is not worthwhile because the amount of time and devotion, the amount of work they do for the four years they are in Parliament is the same as any other Member of any age category sitting in this Chamber. I have that reservation and I will go along with that reservation. Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will just leave the message delivered by the honourable Leader of the Opposition, and he said and I quote, “this reflects the Opposition” because the report is there, the report is out too. It is, perhaps, better if I just give the floor to the Madam Chairperson for her right of reply.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Members, including the honourable Prime Minister and the honourable Leader of the Opposition for their contributions. At this point, I just want to highlight as I had stated in my presentation, that there are certain aspects of the Retirement Allowances Act that we have endorsed that does need further discussion, if we were to make changes to the Act. So, that is something that can be considered that has been stated by honourable Maharaj.

As I reiterate, your concept about having a prorated amount, it is just like in any other workplace, in fact, if you leave other workplace for civil service and other places, you do not get anything, you will wait until you are 55 years. So, if we are trying to apply the principles of equal opportunity employment in Parliament, then we should adhere to the principles of retirement and the need to have a secure future for those that are over 55 years, and you cannot make that comparison really if you are younger because of the workable years. That is how retirement is calculated, that is where the independent consultant came from when he did the independent assessment, and that is how the Committee agreed to it that, that should be the case. But other than that, like I said, there are features that I have mentioned in the Retirement Allowances Act that requires further discussion but they would require the changes to the Act. So, we can discuss that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as an entire Parliament.

Apart from that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to take this time, again, to thank the Parliament staff for their hard work, as always, supporting the work of the Committee. I think it is often understated, but at this point, I do want to say, “*vinaka vakalevu*”. Thank you very much for your support to the work that was done by the Committee. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- When we finish with the process that is now before us, then I will seek your indulgence, honourable Members, some of my experiences in the past review of allowances, we differ a lot, I even wrote to the former Speaker on that as the President of the Party. But having this Report

here before us now, Parliament will now vote on the motion.

Question put.

Votes cast

Ayes	-	40
Noes	-	7
Abstained	-	5

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, as indicated by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, he wants to take this back to their Management Board, as probably directed in their Party constitution.

In the increase of the allowance when FijiFirst was still ruling then, the Committee chaired by one businessman and former MP from Nadi, Mr. Sanjeet Patel, delivered their report in this august Parliament. I was not in Parliament then because I was suspended, but we were sitting in our office – the SODELPA Headquarters - myself, even the present Prime Minister, and a few other Party stalwarts, when we were told that that was the result of what transpired in this august Parliament. They voted in favour of the increase.

The very same thing is coming out of the papers now, honourable Leader of the Opposition. The timing is not right and everything, we are still suffering, we have just come out of the woods, and we are not fully out of the woods yet, and the debt level was increasing, we raised all those in our protest letter to my predecessor and leading the SODELPA then, as the Leader of the Opposition was Ro Teimumu Kepa and the Whip was Mr. Tikotikoca. It came, but no reply was given to our protest letter.

So, it was time for me to rejoin Parliament. I came in, joined Parliament and the allowances then were so high. Then there was shortage of Members in the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, so I was asked. They all looked at me and said, “You are not part of any Standing Committee, might as well take this up”, so I took it up.

In attending the Standing Committee on Public Accounts meeting for the first time, I was given my cheque. When I looked at it, I was so astonished. It this real? Honourable Bilitavu told me, “Yes, that is real, Sir.” Our going into and be part of this Committee and accepting the new allowances, which we were against, this saw to the demise of our Party. Not really demise of the Party, it is still alive, but some of us had to leave because the injury was there.

You people were against this, now you are reaping the benefit of what we had agreed to. Those were the words floated around here. It was \$2,000 plus in a week, that is huge, but that is it. As the honourable Leader of the Opposition said, this is the process that we have here. No matter how you want to style it, how you want to do it, this is how we do it. When I protested and said, “I am the President of the Party and I do not like it”, they did not want to take heed of what I was complaining about because the Leader of the Opposition then and the Members of the Caucus decided on things that happened in this august Parliament.

Again, after reading the papers this morning, I was quite shocked as well because of the innuendo that was going in and out from this side, the National Federation Party was making some comments with a picture of the Deputy Speaker on it, but that was picked up from the Report because the Report has gone out. No matter how you want to do it as well, the Report has gone out. You will

say that there is quite a lot of leakages here but no, leakages happen all the time. Even the honourable Prime Minister is sometimes shocked because the leakage comes from Cabinet Office to us outside of the Cabinet Office. So, this is an old problem that exists within us because we are just human beings. We can be sitting here and agreeing to something, yet we disagree when we go out.

I told the honourable Leader of the Opposition, “Whilst you are still a Member of Government and an MP, do a lot of savings whilst you are still there because the day you finish from Parliament, you walk the streets tomorrow, no one will give a damn about you.” This is in all honesty, and that is why the honourable Leader of the Opposition was saying for you to do your savings and keep it aside.

The honourable Minister for Education came up with some ideas on his own, he forgot about us, but we learnt that he is doing this - he did some extra deductions to his FNPF, and we all followed suit. That is our only savings. Your FNPF as an MP, that is your savings. Unless you want to take it, that is your choice, but to rely on whatever income you get in the bank in trying to visit your constituency where you will be subjected to all kinds of *kerekere*, you just have to fork it out from your own pocket. By the time you finish, you do not have anything with you.

We even went further. This is from the former Minister for Education when he told me one day, “I will be your campaign manager”. I said, “No, I do not want to go into politics because my father and grandmother were both politicians here”. We have learnt a big lesson. We just look at the material things. There was none. The car is a very old car. There was no house in the urban area, only in the village, but they serve their community well.

Honourable Members, that is all we are here for. We are here to serve, but when opportunities like this arises, for me, in listening intently to the honourable Chairperson, I was taken aback when she apologised twice to the honourable Prime Minister when they reduced his pay and allowances. Maybe, that was his decision or his plan, I do not know, but it has come to light now. We can only hear and talk about that when we are provided with that kind of information. It is finished now. The complaints will keep on coming until the cows come home, but they are not here to serve. When we go out, you are expected to do a lot.

The honourable Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection just mentioned that the Girit Festival that they undertook recently, quite a lot of donations mostly came from donors who are willing to give. Otherwise, my poor honourable colleague would have suffered a lot if she had to dig from her own pocket.

Honourable Members, the rest of the questions that were raised by the honourable Leader of the Opposition have been answered briefly by the Chairperson. It can be an ongoing exercise and that is for you to decide.

The honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance has decided that it is a Party’s decision. So, there is 44, and we will just have to go along with that. That is the decision you have made, honourable Members, whether it is strategic or whatever, that is the decision you have made. Now, the issue raised by the honourable Leader of the Opposition, again, do we have the ability to pay and when will this kick in? That is for the Government to decide. We are not going to be making decisions here, no, only in the Budget, it will be brought before us here. This one here is a separate one.

We have been hearing lately about the Corrections Service (Amendment) Bill 2024 that was presented by the honourable Attorney-General. He talked about the very thing that we are addressing here - an increase in their pay, increase in their uniform, there are so many things that were addressed.

The Fiji Water people went on strike in Nadi and they received some 26 percent or something. The honourable Minister for Labour knows that very well. This is an ongoing thing; it will never end. That is all that I want to share with you, honourable Members.

I am sorry and I must apologise, on behalf of the Secretariat, there is no tea being prepared, no dinner being prepared, and we work so hard to try and keep abreast with the changing decisions being we made from the Government's side - do this, wait for this, and that is why we had to send the flying Minute across at midday today, to ensure that we comply with the time requirement, et cetera. Once again, thank you very much.

ADJOURNMENT

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

That Parliament adjourns until Friday, 28th June, 2024, at 10.00 a.m.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER. - Honourable Members, that concludes the end of our sitting for this week, and I must thank each and every one of you for your lively contributions throughout the week, except for the noise coming from honourable Ketan Lal. He asked for a breathalyser, and I thought he wanted a breathalyser.

(Laughter)

Honourable Members, I now declare that Parliament is adjourned until Friday, 28th June, 2024, at 10.00 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 5.34 p.m.