

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

THURSDAY, 23RD MAY, 2024

[CORRECTED COPY]

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THURSDAY, 23RD MAY, 2024

The Parliament met at 9.51 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Aliki Bia.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Wednesday, 22nd May, 2024, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

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

Students and Teachers - Marist Brothers Primary School

Honourable Members, once again this morning we are joined by another lot of teachers and students of Marist Brothers Primary School. Welcome to Parliament and I sincerely hope that the proceedings this morning will give you a better perspective of how Parliament works.

(Acclamation)

Thank you and I extend that welcome as well to the members of the public who are sitting in the gallery.

Convention on Cybercrime (Budapest Convention)

Honourable Members, please, kindly take note that pursuant to Standing Order 130(5), I have provided notification in the gazette that the Convention on Cybercrime (Budapest Convention) has been approved by Parliament.

Honourable Luo Jesse - Parliament of Vanuatu

Lastly, an honourable Member of Parliament from Vanuatu is also in the gallery, the

honourable Luo Jesse. Welcome, Sir. I hope you brought the good weather with you, Sir.

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please take note that there will be two Committee Reports for tabling today.

Review Report – Sugar Cane Growers Fund 2019-2020 Annual Reports

HON. S. TUBUNA,- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs is pleased to submit to Parliament the Consolidated Review Report of the Sugar Cane Growers Fund, 2019 and 2020 Annual Reports.

Last year and early this year, the Committee undertook site visits to the Western and Northern Divisions to delve into the operational dynamics of the sugar industry.

Additionally, the Committee received submissions from the Chief Executive Officer of the Sugar Cane Growers Fund. The Committee was made aware of the legislative challenges faced by the Sugar Cane Growers Fund to extend credit services to non-sugar sector and the poor financial performance of the South Pacific Fertilizers Limited in which Sugar Cane Growers Fund has 90 percent shares.

The Committee noted that the Annual Reports provided by the Sugar Cane Growers Fund failed to include Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for the periods under review. These indicators are essential for the Committee to make more informed recommendations and to gauge the performance of the organisation.

The Committee further noted that various assistance and programmes provided by the Ministry of Sugar other than Sugar Cane Growers Fund to assist sugarcane farmers in improving production and quality of cane. For example, sugarcane development and farm assistance, weedicide and fertiliser subsidy, funding to improve the cane access roads, subsidy to purchase mechanical harvesters, grants to encourage new farmers in the sugar sector and cane cartage grant.

While discussing the reports, the Committee noted that utilising rail transport for cane would prove significantly more cost-effective compared to trucks. Trucks rely heavily on fuel and are subject to escalating fuel prices and contribute to road congestion and cause road damage.

While the Committee expressed satisfaction with the Sugar Cane Growers Fund's Annual Reports during the review periods, it also acknowledged areas for improvement. This includes the need for improved coordination, commitment and accountability amongst all stakeholders.

I would like to extend our appreciation to all the stakeholders for their valuable input. Finally, I would like to thank our Committee Members who are part of the team that produced this Report, namely: Deputy Chairperson, honourable Sashi Kiran, honourable Premila Kumar, honourable Tomasi Tunabuna and honourable Semi Koroilavesau.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on behalf the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, I commend the Consolidated Sugar Cane Growers Fund 2019 and 2020 Review Report to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

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

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

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, pursuant to the decision of the Standing Orders Committee, I now call on the Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources to table the Committee's Report. For the information of honourable Members, this should have been undertaken by the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament but since he was busy, he has, therefore, asked honourable Minister Vosarogo to stand in for him.

Standing Orders - Amendments

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the consideration and review of the practices and procedures of Parliament and to make recommendations for the improvement and change or for the development of new practices and procedures are the mandates of the Standing Orders Committee. As a living document, the Standing Orders should be regularly amended to align, of course, with the ever-evolving rules and procedures of any modern, democratic society. This ensures that the Parliamentary processes remain relevant and practical in addressing the needs of that society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Orders Committee met on four separate occasions: on 1st May, 3rd May, 17th May and the 22nd May, 2024. On these occasions, the Committee met and discussed the Amendments to the Standing Orders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the proposed Amendments to the Standing Orders which have now been circulated to all honourable Members of Parliament are necessary because they impact the way Parliament conducts itself. These proposed Amendments relate to the performance, functions and the workings of Parliament. In considering and reviewing the practices and procedures of Parliament, the proposed Amendments which the Committee agreed to are hereby presented to Parliament as mandated under Standing Orders 128.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Report of the Standing Orders Committee, by convention, is a functional document. The recommended Amendments as well as the Committee meeting minutes are also annexed to this Report.

At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I express my appreciation to Substantive and Alternative Members who contributed greatly to the review process: honourable Speaker as the Chairperson, honourable Ro Filipe Tuisawau, honourable Alitia Bainivalu, honourable Pio Tikoduadua, honourable Aseri Radrodro and later the honourable Ifereimi Vasu and, of course, the honourable Viliame Naupoto and also the honourable Ratu Rakuira Vakalalabure and honourable Alvick Maharaj.

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

(Reported handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 128(3), I hereby move a motion without notice:

That a debate on the contents of the Report is initiated later today.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

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

1. Hon.- Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs;
2. Hon. Minister for Agriculture and Waterways;
3. Hon. Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport;
4. Hon. Attorney-General and Minister for Justice; and
5. Hon. Minister for Fisheries and Forestry.

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

The Duavata Partnership and Bilateral Relationship with New Zealand

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Good morning, Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Ministers and honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Assistant Ministers and Members of Parliament. I also bid a very good morning to our visitors to the Parliament this morning, students and our honourable Member visitor from Vanuatu and all of you ladies and gentlemen. Thank you very much for your interest in the proceedings of the Parliament of Fiji and all those who are tuning in to the live broadcast of today's proceedings and those listening to the radio. *Ni sa bula vinaka, namaste* and a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver my Ministerial Statement elaborating on Fiji's bilateral relationship with New Zealand and our *Duavata* Partnership Agreement. Sir, New Zealand is one of our oldest partners and friends in the region. It is one of the first countries that Fiji established diplomatic relationships with upon independence in 1970. We share more than just our geographic location, we share a rich historic, political, cultural and people-to-people links that informs our relationship on all fronts.

Even as a colony, we stood together in times of crisis, as we did with our other allies. Our service personnel stood together in the Pacific during WWII, in the Solomons, in Bougainville and later on in Malaya. And in recent times, in peacekeeping missions in Lebanon, Sinai, with the South Pacific Peacekeeping Forces in Bougainville, Timor Leste, and again in the Solomons under the Regional Assistance Mission Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

Outside the military front, we stand together in times of natural disasters and at the humanitarian emergency front. The relationship between Fiji and New Zealand assumed a new frame with the signing of the *Duavata* Partnership Agreement in 2022. Sir, under the *Duavata* Partnership, Fiji and New Zealand collaborate on the following areas:

1. Economic Resilience;
2. Security;
3. Social Well-Being; and
4. Climate Change and Resilience.

The *Duavata* Partnership covers the period 2022 – 2025 and we are now looking at review of the agreement to identify opportunities for further collaboration in the key sectors. On the invitation of the then Prime Minister in New Zealand, honourable Christopher Hipkins I undertook an official visit to New Zealand from 5th June to 8th June last year. It was a first official visit of a Fijian Prime Minister to New Zealand in 16 years and my first official visit after 25 years since I last visited as Prime Minister in 1998.

Sir, the visit involved a number of high-level engagements with key government and non-government stakeholders. I met with the then Prime Minister Hipkins and we discussed a range of issue including the:

1. growing geo-strategic interest in the region;
2. Pacific regionalism; and
3. the importance of building longer term capabilities so that Fiji and Pacific Island Countries are self-reliant and how New Zealand can help us in that journey.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, New Zealand and Fiji alongside other Pacific Island forum leaders share an ambitious vision for the social, cultural, economic and environmental resilience of the region where we are strong, prosperous and secure. We are stronger when we combine our efforts and focus on Pacific regionalism and the priorities of the Blue Pacific continent.

Mr. Speaker, we share a strong focus on regionalism, including upholding Pacific Islands Forum unity; support for the University of South Pacific; and working with other traditional partners, such as Australia, on defence and security measures.

We also discussed our long history of close sporting, cultural, and people-to-people links and the work we are doing in the spirit of our *Duavata* Partnership Agreement.

Mr. Speaker, Fiji and New Zealand are connected by the depth of our cooperation across a broad range of sectors, including policing, health, trade and industry, education and fisheries, to name a few. I also told the then honourable Prime Minister that the People's Coalition Government is serious about growing our economy and that we are keen to work harder to boost Fiji's export capacity to New Zealand. The then Prime Minister also expressed gratitude for the deployment to New Zealand of our emergency and RFMF personnel following *Cyclone Gabrielle*.

The then honourable Prime Minister and I also discussed a Defence Cooperation Agreement that will allow defence officials to undertake engagement in different areas, including capacity building and upskilling and exposure to new technologies, interoperability and technical support, among other matters. The Agreement will also strengthen maritime security and improve the disaster and humanitarian response co-ordination between our two nations.

Mr. Speaker, that Defence Cooperation Agreement was signed the following week between our two Defence Ministers in Suva on 14th June, 2023. Most of the former military officers in this august Parliament were beneficiaries of the then Defence Cooperation Programme or Military Assistance Programme with New Zealand during our times in service.

On meeting with then Foreign Minister, honourable Nanaia Mahuta, we delved into our economic recovery after the pandemic, and the challenges that climate change poses to our development aspirations. We agreed that climate change remains the single greatest threat to lives and livelihoods in the Pacific region. After that meeting, honourable Mahuta announced the additional support of NZ\$11.1 million to assist our response to the impacts of climate change.

I welcomed the boost which will support the implementation of renewable energy projects, infrastructure resilience, and climate policy. At the meeting with honourable Mahuta, I also raised the possibility of the grant of visa on arrival for Fiji citizens. This is an issue that we will continue to raise with the New Zealand government. I also had the opportunity to meet with the then Minister for Climate Change, honourable James Shaw. We discussed opportunities where Fiji and New Zealand can work together at the multilateral level and in particular at the Conference of the Parties (COP) negotiations. We also discussed the need for public- private sector cooperation and the importance of new technologies in moving us forward to meet our commitments under the Paris Agreement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, New Zealand has been a long-term proactive partner in supporting Fiji's ongoing efforts to manage the increasingly detrimental impacts of climate change. New Zealand has provided NZ\$20 million in flexible climate finance, along with capacity support and technical assistance to support Fiji in delivering on our national climate change priorities. New Zealand also continues to support the National Disaster Management Office, including the prepositioning of emergency supplies in Fiji to assist during times of disaster, as and when needed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, New Zealand remains one of our most important trade and investment partners with two-way trade between New Zealand and Fiji reaching an all-time high of NZ\$1.36 billion in 2023.

Mr. Speaker, New Zealand has also been supporting Fiji with trade negotiations capacity support. This includes a grant of NZ\$800,000, to support ongoing training for our trade officials. We continue to collaborate on trade issues including for the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) which this august Parliament has resolved to ratify earlier this week.

While in New Zealand, I also met with the Fiji-New Zealand Business Council. The event was attended by up to 100 members of the Fiji-New Zealand Business Council and I record with regret that some of those very distinguished former Fiji citizens were there at that meeting are now no longer with us. I raised with our private sector partners the importance of continuing to invest in Fiji, highlighting Fiji's positive economic growth, following the COVID-19 pandemic and to support the Government's investment target of NZ\$2 billion.

I also expressed my support towards the revival of the Fiji-NZ Business Council as an avenue to open up further opportunities of investment to Fiji. I am happy to see the next Fiji-New Zealand Business Council meeting being hosted here in Fiji in June.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I also made sure to take time to visit members of the Fiji diaspora living in both Auckland and Wellington. We were able to share with the Fijian Community our national development priorities, the upward trajectory of growth and development. In particular, I conveyed to them our appreciation for their continued support through remittances received from New Zealand. As you may be aware, Mr. Speaker, Sir, personal remittances to Fiji reached \$1.25 billion in 2023, an

increase of 20.4 percent over the figure in 2022. Our people abroad make valuable contributions and I urged the diaspora community to continue to be good Ambassadors of Fiji to New Zealand. I also urged them to be law abiding contributors to the New Zealand economy.

In concluding, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this time to thank the New Zealand Government for the protocols and courtesies accorded to me during my visit. Please allow me to express my gratitude to the people and Government of New Zealand for the support and assistance we continue to receive under the *Duavata* Partnership.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you to the honourable Prime Minister for updating us on the *Duavata* Partnership that we have with New Zealand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this particular partnership that was born in 2022 was done to elevate the relationship to a new level and we are happy to hear that it is now being reviewed and taken to another level by the honourable Prime Minister only for the betterment of Fiji. It has a new level of expanded strategic cooperation and also in the years to come, it is also based on the shared values that we have with New Zealand, Sir, and an equal partnership. A lot of it actually comes through trust and cooperation.

We, of course, have our shared identity as the honourable Prime Minister has pointed out. We have mutual respect, we have historical connections and these are things that are important to this particular *Duavata* Partnership. The goals are fairly much the same, but I want to also take this opportunity to say thank you also to New Zealand for all the tremendous support that they have given us during times that have been hard and also during COVID-19 and whenever we have natural disasters.

We have the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also as a shared vision for our work that we do in improving the lives of our citizens and people and also for the planet, Sir. I think, when this agreement actually started, they took notice of our 5-Year and 20-Year Development Plans, I know it is being reviewed at the moment, I hope that all of that also forms a part of the review that is currently happening.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am informed by the honourable Leader of the Opposition that there was a tremendous amount of support given to our dairy industry. I think it was about \$12 million that came, it was very handy because majority part of it was given to take care of brucellosis and tuberculosis issues that we had in the dairy industry. It is also a good opportunity and a time to say thank you to New Zealand.

The partnership also looked at the democracy and its values, economic resilience as the honourable Prime Minister has pointed out, and also with respect to security and the tremendous amount of help and assistance that have been given by New Zealand in terms of defence.

Regionally speaking, they have stood up at a time of need of our Pacific neighbours where they uplifted our soldiers, et cetera, whenever we have come to the aid of our Pacific Island neighbours.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there has also been a lot of strengthening of institutional capacity and Fiji's governance bodies in terms of the judiciary, defence and security forces so that the rule of law is consistently upheld and this is very important. I think sometimes we miss what we have in our partnership, but it needs to be said and it is a very important aspect of this particular agreement. The social well-being also in terms of coordinating preparedness for natural disasters, like COVID-19

that actually came along, Mr. Speaker, all of these things have come out of it and born out of that particular partnership.

One of the most important things that the honourable Prime Minister pointed out, and again we have a total support with respect to this partnership is climate change. I think New Zealand recognises this so much with respect to Fiji's position, where we are and how we have actually gone ahead and been able to do a lot in that particular space.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think this particular partnership is based on trust, respect and openness. It is certainly an example to the rest of the world on how you can operate in a region and we are extremely confident and happy that this particular agreement will be taken forward in the direction that it has from 2022, as we have a very strong relationship with New Zealand. They have always stood by us in times of need. I think a lot has been said by the honourable Prime Minister that has covered a lot and I wish you well in the review, et cetera that has gone on, Sir, and may this relationship prosper with our neighbours and our brothers and sisters in New Zealand.

One small point, I do not think there is any one in this room that does not have a relative in New Zealand. There are quite a few of our diaspora that live there. May this relationship prosper, Mr. Speaker.

Fight Against Poverty Through Active Agriculture Production

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, first of all, I want to join the honourable Prime Ministers in welcoming the Year 8 students of Marist Brothers Primary School and I am proud to say that it includes my youngest son, Joshua Rayalu. I hope that his visit to Parliament will alleviate all his questions because he keeps asking me, "what do you do in that House", and that he will one day join his father, grandfather and great grandfather as a Member of this august Parliament and serve the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand before this august Parliament to outline a vision on the use of agriculture as a tool in Fiji's fight against poverty and the associated social ills.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we understand, poverty leads to many other social ills such as drug and substance abuse, domestic violence, suicide and exploitation of children, to name a few. Poverty is a cancer that is eating away at the very flesh and muscle and bones of society that must be addressed head-on by Government in partnership with relevant stakeholders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) for the period 2019 to 2020 estimated that the national incidence of poverty in Fiji impacted 24.1 percent of our population. Poverty is a bottleneck to socio-economic development, thus if we are to improve the quality of people's lives in Fiji, greater efforts must be made by Government to fight and reduce poverty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must understand that the fight against poverty in reality is a fight against drug and substance abuse, particularly against our youth, fight against domestic violence against our women and fight against the exploitation of our children among the many other social ills brought about by poverty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to the last National Agricultural Census Report, close to 40 percent of households in Fiji are involved in agriculture, yet they are often constrained by limited access to resources, services, technologies, markets and economic opportunities that lower agricultural productivity and income levels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry's objective to realise the full potential of Agriculture as a tool for socio-economic development and growth has led to the formulation of a 5-year Strategic Development Plan (SDP) for 2024-2028 that aligns with Government's National Development Plan (NDP) and the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals to develop and transform agriculture in Fiji.

Priority areas in the National Development Plan that align with the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways Strategic Development Plan include:

- Food and Nutrition Security;
- Health and Medical Services through the one health strategy;
- Social inclusion and empowerment;
- Women and youth empowerment and development through agriculture;
- Support large scale agriculture production to achieve economies of scale; and
- Support the development of Small and Medium Enterprises.

In the short term, the Ministry's SDP provides a roadmap to fulfill the Fijian Governments call for agriculture to drive sustainable development and economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government through the Ministry of Agriculture has already embarked on consultations with other Ministries, Civil Society Organisations and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) on the use of agriculture as a tool to fight poverty. Government will use a multi-sectoral approach to address social, economic and political challenges that are often faced by individuals, marginalised groups and communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the multi-sectoral approach will work towards:

- Identifying and assisting the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in Fiji, in actual fact this project will target the poorest of the poor.
- Relocation and training for the identified families and individuals to utilise identified idle lands for active agriculture production.
- Targeting women and youth to get involved in active agriculture production with the renewed interest and gradually elevating them to be agricultural entrepreneurs through SME development.
- Putting in the necessary financial investment to build rural infrastructure, especially in energy, transport, water and sanitation in collaboration with other sectors.
- Addressing structural constraints faced by the poor agricultural households through increasing their access to government assistance, as an example, the farm road development and other programmes that currently run within the Ministry.
- Improving their capacity to manage risks and increase their agricultural productivity.
- Group small-scale farmers into cooperatives and link them directly to markets and improve the food systems.
- Creation of decent off-farm employment for the poor in agriculture and the rural non-farm economy, including fostering entrepreneurship and providing occupational skills.
- Building of human capital, in particular, access to basic social services such as health and education, as well as occupational skills and organisation capacity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me say that the agriculture sector has a great potential to contribute to sustainable development and fight against poverty and its social ills. This, however, will need the support and collaboration of other Government ministries and stakeholders.

The potential for the sector to grow during challenging times has been proven during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, that is, when other sectors remained stagnant, the agriculture sector grew its agriculture production by 7 percent in the 2020-2021 period and by 16 percent in the 2021-2022 period.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, poverty issues related to rural urban-drift, rise in informal settlements and crime were previously addressed by the Pacific Community Network (PCN) in a project that was supported by the Ministry of Housing between 2016-2017. This involved the relocation of poor households from informal settlements to settle on agricultural leased land and engaged in productive agriculture activities and small businesses. There were five families relocated to Lomaivuna and five were relocated to Waidina. To-date the five families in Lomaivuna have developed from a hopeless situation living in informal settlements to a life full of hope where they have thrived in agriculture, ensured their food security and livelihoods requirements and are able to send their children to universities. The other five families in Waidina, however, did not survive as the support services ran out when the programme was shelved in 2018 by the Ministry of Housing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways staff through consultations with other government ministries has received wide support to jointly address the issue of poverty using the mandates of each ministry. We have also drafted a Cabinet paper for endorsement and requested a budget for this work under the 2024-2025 financial year. The outcomes from the consultations have taken note of the issues faced and lessons learnt from the PCN Project in 2016 and government through the Ministry of Agriculture will take the lead in the implementation of the upcoming project to use agriculture as a tool to alleviate poverty beginning with the poorest of the poor in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, based on the estimation for population for the year 2020 and the last Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) Report for the 2019-2020, there are approximately 55,000 households in Fiji who are living in poverty. This project will commence after identifying the poorest of the poor within these households to start off with.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, having said that, I ask this august Parliament to support this initiative on the use of agriculture as a tool to alleviate poverty and other related social ills in Fiji. We look forward to further discussions, collaboration and coordination with other Government ministries, the Opposition included and relevant stakeholders and partners that work within this space. God bless Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I offer the floor to the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate for their response, I am intending to adjourn Parliament for tea, at the same time, I would like to invite the school children of Marist Brothers Primary School who are here and also members of the public in the gallery to, please, join your parliamentarians when we break for tea.

On this issue of poverty, just a small contribution from the Chair, as you go up towards Lami and crossing the Tamavua-i-Wai Bridge, when you look to the left when you travelling towards Lami, you will notice the old Suva Dump that used to be the rubbish dump before. It is now covered with bush, strangely there are patches of plantations there now; cassava, dalo and everything. That has happened on their own volition addressing the issue that the honourable Minister has raised, that is, food security.

Most of these people come from the islands, they have land in their islands but out here, they will come across whether it is a dump site or whether that dump site is emitting gas, gas will kind of poison the food, they do not know that. We look on without giving proper advice there as it is allowable or not and further up, there is a clearance of *tiri* or *dogo* land.

There grows another kind of weed known locally as *karisi ni Jaina* (watercress). That is another variety and you see women in numbers sitting there pulling the *karisi* out, bundling it and selling. I do not know whether they sell it in the Delainavesi market out there in the streets, but these are things that are happening before our eyes for food security and how they want to address poverty. They are taking their own initiatives here. That is all I just wanted to share, so we do not look far, just look immediately around us and you will notice this happening .

We intend to adjourn Parliament now.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.38 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.33 a.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before we move on, I would just like to acknowledge the presence of the University of Fiji Journalism students who are seated in the gallery with their lecturer, Mr. Matai Niumataiwalu.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, I welcome the students and of course, our colleague Mr. Niumataiwalu into Parliament this morning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to make a contribution to the Ministerial Statement made by the honourable Minister for Agriculture. Again honourable Minister, be assured there is always support from the Opposition on agriculture, not only on agriculture, but on key sectors as well because agriculture is important for us in terms of food security and economic empowerment as well, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am thankful to the honourable Minister for bringing again the poverty incident level according to the 2019 and 2020 HIES Report because that 24.1 percent is something that the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance has always not agreed to and he has his own figures. But that was pre-there before elections, honourable Minister. I know he has changed and accepted that figure as official now. The incidence of poverty level stands at 24.1 percent. Thank you, honourable Minister.

Agriculture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will just refer as I have stated, totally agree to almost everything that the honourable Minister had stated. Of course, thank you for your strategic development plan, we from the Opposition have also requested for a copy of the plan, given the importance of the sector.

Just a quick comment, again, I think I have raised it a few times, I have talked about food and nutrition security, I keep asking about the Food and Nutrition Security Policy that was drafted way back in 2017 but still has not made its way even perhaps to Cabinet. I do not know where it is but that is a very important document given our commitment to FAO in Rome in 2016 when we received our award based on our achievements on the MDGs then. So that is a key document for Government because we made that commitment to the Director General FAO in Rome.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the recent Fiji Institute of Chartered Accountants Congress, I was in a session with the honourable Deputy Prime Minister Gavoka on alternative tourism and I spoke very passionately again, not only on agriculture but on the resource-based sector. I started by referring to the country private sector diagnostics that was done by World Bank and IFC. One of the key areas that was highlighted in as far as Fiji's economy and our post COVID-19 recovery is on agri-logistics. It is not only about the agriculture itself but, of course, the value chain as well.

This is very important for us in terms of the way forward. We have to create the environment and therefore, the three levels of investment, particularly on the resource-based and I am talking here particularly for agriculture, private sector investment because part of that report too, I am sure the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance is aware, is on infrastructure, land access, air access, seaport access and even communications and energy.

These are all important enablers for agriculture to go to the next level, particularly in terms of cold storage because is perishable. I will not talk more on that but perhaps, the other one that I raised and caught the attention of most of the participants is, classic economics tells us about land, labor and capital but in some of the research that I did, for us to go to the next level, we add another three to land, labour and capital; science, technology and entrepreneurship. That will elevate us the next level and it is time now that we sit together, look at the strategic development plan, I saw in last

week's paper about tissue culture in banana; that is good. That is science and technology but we need to take it to the dairy sector, we need to take it to fisheries, et cetera.

Perhaps the suggestion that I will always make here, something that Government needs to consider seriously is about getting specialists from abroad in capacities where we are lack in. Science, technology and entrepreneurship will help us in moving, not only agriculture but the resource-based sector forward, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Once again, I fully support it and we will continue to provide the necessary advice as well to the other side of Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament, you had asked to speak last and now, you have changed your mind again. You sent a message and I accepted it that you wanted to speak the last.

Update on Fiji's Participation at IMO

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, yes, I can speak the last. The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, esteemed Members of Parliament, fellow Fijians joining via the Parliament livestream; I stand before you today to discuss an important aspect of our nation's maritime policy, the establishment of an International Maritime Organization (IMO) Regional Presence Office (RPO), and our active participation in key IMO meetings. These efforts are integral to safeguard our marine environment, enhancing maritime safety and promoting sustainable development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the international shipping industry is responsible for transporting 90 percent of the world's commodities. It not only the most cost-effective option for international import an export, but also the safest and most eco-friendly mode of transport as emphasised by Ocean Insights. It is employing approximately 1.5 million individuals worldwide, the shipping industry is significant source of employment. However, it is predominantly male with females making up only 2 percent of all seafarers.

In our region, the maritime shipping industry plays a critical role, serving as the back bone of transportation of Pacific Island countries and their communities by moving of majority people, goods and resources. This sector is vital for fostering trade and economic growth, influencing nearly every aspect of the development initiatives. In terms of the establishment of the IMO or RPO, as Fiji has long recognised the pivotal role that IMO plays in the global maritime industry, the establishment of an RPO endorsed by the Government in our region, is a testament to our commitment to supporting IMOs initiatives and ensuring that the unique needs of Pacific Island countries are addressed.

The RPO will serve as a hub for regional cooperation providing technical assistance, capacity building and facilitating the implementation of IMO conventions and standards. It will also enhance our ability to respond effectively to maritime challenges, including environment protection, safety and security. By having a regional office, we can ensure that our maritime policies are aligned with the regulations, standards and best practices, while also tailoring them to a specific regional context.

On 18th March 2024, during the margins of the Marine Environment Protection Committee, (MEPC 81), I had the honour of signing an MOU on the RPO on behalf of the Government of the Republic of Fiji with the IMO Secretary-General, Mr. Arsenio Dominguez, on behalf of the IMO. The MOU outlines the framework for establishing the IMOs RPO in Fiji, designed to enhance maritime development in the region, including some of the objectives to bridge the gap in maritime development needs and execution, the continued support in terms of IMO support to the region, especially, in standards and regulations in alignment with the international norms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there was also discussion on the IMO Green House Gas (GHG) emissions reduction negotiations. The gravity of climate crisis cannot be overstated. It is imperative for us to take resolute and decisive measures to alleviate its impacts. Fiji is part of the lines of high ambition states when we call ourselves in that group, the six pack, that have been actively participating the IMO GHG emission reduction negotiations. The Pacific's role is well recognised as being catalytic to achieving the high levels of ambition agreed in the 2023 Revised IMO Strategy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2023 Revised IMO GHG Strategy represent a comprehensive and ambitious plan to address climate change by significantly reducing the carbon footprint of the maritime industry. For the information of this august Parliament, the revised IMO GHG Strategy sets ambitious targets for the maritime sector to reduce its emissions, aligning with the broader goal of limiting global warming in accordance with the Paris Agreement.

The key targets under the revised strategy include achieving a reduction of the carbon intensity of international shipping as measured by carbon dioxide emissions per transport work by, at least, 40 percent by 2030 and 70 percent by 2050, compared to 2008 levels. Moreover, the strategy aims for the total GHG emissions from international shipping to be reduced by, at least, 50 percent by 2050, also compared to 2008 levels.

These targets represent a significant step towards decarbonisation of the sector with further discussions anticipated in setting a pathway towards full carbonisation by the end of the century. Having agreed on the 2023 strategy negotiations on GHG reduction for shipping at IMO will culminate in 2025 in agreement of a basket of measures to achieve the IMO's 2023 strategy for the decarbonisation of shipping by 2050, including an economic measure that puts a price on GHG emissions.

Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC 82) in October 2024 through to MEPC 83 next May is the critical period for negotiating of the detail of the proposed measures and disbursement of revenues.

The Pacific Alliance have previously submitted that the measures to be adopted should comprise a simple Global Fuel Standard (GFS) and a universal mandatory levy of all international maritime GHG emissions with an entry price of \$150 per tonne, CO2 equivalent. Global fuel standard seeks to promote the use of cleaner more environmentally friendly fuels to minimise the environmental impact of shipping. I am happy to say that there is a growing consensus around a universal levy as the leading contender from many states at the IMO meeting.

Sir, the Pacific Alliance has successfully inserted the concept of an equitable transition into a strategy and has called for at least 50 percent of revenues to flow to the Global South, in particular the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and the Least Developing Countries (LDCs). Potential revenues from IMO measures could be as high as \$100 billion per annum. The earliest these measures will flow in any real quantity in 2027 if we do our homework and also push for this, if our negotiators are successful in confirming the basket of measures and revenue disbursement architecture by 2025, today, I am also committed to this highly ambitious timelines.

There are two critical negotiation rounds at IMO in September and October 2024 and April 2025 with submission deadlines in early 2024 and February 2025 respectively. The Pacific will need to make multiple submissions to both rounds with a content dependent on the outcome of ongoing bilateral negotiations with multiple partners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, active participation at IMO is crucial for advancing our national interest and contributing to global maritime governance in addition to the basket of measures and also the

financial rewards for our island countries as highly affected by climate change. Fiji has been vocal and proactive member in the IMO and we have reaffirmed our commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and we advocate for stronger measures.

We have also highlighted the need for financial mechanisms to support our developing countries and which will continue to participate in various international working groups, focussing on specific issues such as reduction of sulphur oxide emissions, developing of low carbon and zero carbon fuels and the protection of vulnerable marine ecosystems. Our experts have consistently provided valuable insights and best practices from our regional experiences.

The honourable Prime Minister has mentioned the Pacific Blue Shipping Partnerships and, of course, my predecessor honourable Usamate and the Leader of the Opposition and again this is an important initiative which we will continue to support.

Domestic shipping had no profile a decade ago today and partly due to the success of the Pacific Alliance, the significant understanding amongst donors and Fiji and RMI agreed to co-chair the Pacific Blue Shipping Partnership which calls for an investment for \$500 million in climate financing across six Pacific Island States.

The honourable Prime Minister has reaffirmed Fiji's commitment to the Pacific Blue Shipping Partnerships at the margins of COP 28 in terms of green shipping leading the global energy transition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Republic of Marshall Island is a key partner and we will continue to liaise closely with them and the RMI Special Envoy for Maritime Decarbonization, His Excellency Ambassador Ishoda, has invited Fiji to join him in hosting a Ministerial Donor Council in Korea mid-year with the intention of bringing together Pacific Ministers with our major bilateral partners and the Global Climate Fund to bring focus and high level political support to this initiative and to ensure it remains firmly under country control.

This would be the first major multi-country application to the GCF of its kind, Ministers from Tuvalu and Vanuatu have already signaled their commitment to support this approach and the EU & Government of Netherlands have been approached to support. This proposal would fit well with the existing Fijian initiatives in particular the Agreement with Australia for the Revitalizations of Ship Building and Ship Repair in Fiji.

Given our position as a major transshipment hub, Fiji's best position for the PBSP countries to act as the region's technology transfer hub with numerous multipliers of Fiji's engineering ship repair, maintenance industries, its maritime facilities and financing an insurance sub-sectors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our engagement with IMO is not just about compliance with international regulations, it is about shaping the future and ensuring that we have the best outcomes for our nation in Fiji and for our people. Fiji is committed to being a leader in sustainable maritime development and ensuring that our maritime industry contributes effectively to our economy and our global community.

Sir, in conclusion, I wish to acknowledge the establishment of the IMO Regional Office and our active participation in terms of all the contributions of all the officials and our regional partner countries and I thank the honourable Prime Minister for reaffirming our stance at the IMO when he met the Secretary-General in his recent visit to the UK.

I also acknowledge and thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition, my predecessor, honourable Jone Usamate for their contributions in the area of climate change and the previous work done in terms of the IMO and our negotiations, and we as a Coalition Government will continue to build upon the work of past governments prior to us.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for his Ministerial Statement on the engagements with the IMO and on the opening up of the Regional Office in the Pacific and also the further developments that have taken place in order to implement and make operational some of the commitments that have been made.

We, in the Pacific are just small dots in the ocean and we are, indeed, maritime organisation, maritime countries and anything to do with the ocean is always very important for us. I must congratulate the honourable Minister for the signing with the IMO for the opening of the office here in the Pacific. The regional office which once again enhances our image as the hub for the Pacific and it also allows us to be very closely involved with all the things that will be taking place in anything to do with oceans in the Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the things I was talking about, I think yesterday in relation to the honourable Prime Minister's Address, one of the key things in terms of the greenhouse gas emission strategy for the IMO. The first of the strategies was implemented in 2018 and I was a part of those initial discussions and now we have the new 2023 which provided a lot more details and these targets that we have are not easy targets.

The target for 2030 is to reduce emissions by 40 percent within six years. This is a huge target, and I am glad to hear from the Minister that he has talked about the various ways in which we try to approach this, through the Pacific Blue Shipping and access to the funding, different ways of getting that funding but also, I am glad to hear of the first multi-country approach to the Green Climate Fund (GCF) which is a group of small island nations and I think this is very innovative.

In fact, the small island nations of the Pacific are very innovative in anything to do with oceans to try to get that fund because if I just stated an example, for here in Fiji, our largest vessels in the country are the ro-ro vessels. They are old fleets and big ships, but they are very old, and we have seen the incidents that have taken place over the past few years. You always have the balance between trying to decarbonize these fleets and not realizing that everything to do with trade depends on our shipping fleets, especially as they travel across the country, so we have very old boats. I think we need to find ways to get newer boats into the system and I am not too sure how that can be done, because to decarbonize old boats, the only thing you can do is to get rid of them.

The huge challenge there and as I look at the target again, I think the target was to decarbonize 80 percent of all our boats by the year 2040 and I am looking forward for us being able to progress this well so we can achieve this target. I am glad to hear the initiatives that the Minister has made together with the other party.

One of the things that come to my mind, if we are going to have a levy, I am not too sure about this universal levy. I am glad to hear that most of the money that is raised from the revenue of this levy will come to the Global South; will come to the Small Island Developing States. But in my mind, I am wondering if we still have old ships, does that mean that we also pay a higher fine for the fact that we have high gas emitting vessels? I hope that that is an issue that can be addressed into the future.

We obviously need support for our shipping sector and I know that this has been something that has been discussed regionally, at the global level and I am glad to hear about the innovative

measures that are taking place now to try to push this forward and I look forward to the events for success, so we can really decarbonize our ships in the Pacific so we can join this fight against climate change in the world.

I was also reading up and I noticed that we also entered into some agreements with the United States to establishing a green shipping corridor where they will be providing technical cooperations to help us in the early adaption of zero emission fuels. I think eventually that is where we will be going into the future, but once again Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his speech and on this side, we will be in full support on anything to do with the greenhouse gas emissions and the support for the maritime sector in the Pacific.

Strengthening the Fight Against Corruption - FICAC

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Ministers, fellow honourable Members of this august Parliament and members of the public in the gallery and those watching and joining us virtually; good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I begin, I believe it is fitting at this juncture to pay tribute to the late Joji Washington Dumukoro, the Acting Deputy Secretary for Home Affairs who will be laid to rest today. Mr. Dumukoro is from Kadavu, he joined me at the Ministry of Home Affairs in 2000 when the staff of PSC and Parliament were transferred as a result of the events of 2000. Since then, we have become friends, he is probably one of the only staff who has worked there for, I believe, a good 24 years. May his soul rest in peace. It says in Deuteronomy 16:19 and I quote: “They are not to be unjust or show partiality in their judgments; and they are not to accept bribes, for gifts blind the eyes even of wise and honest men, and cause them to give wrong decisions.”

I rise today to address this esteemed Parliament on the important role and achievements of the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC). At the outset, I would like to state that corruption in any form undermines the rule of law, disturbs economic growth, and erodes public trust. The *Bible* like every other religious book, they all denounce corruption. II Peter 2:19 states and I quote: “They promise them freedom while they themselves are slaves of destructive habits - for we are slaves of anything that has conquered us.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand here today for this Parliament to create a legacy. A legacy that all of us will denounce corruption, just like going to fight for poverty as we heard this morning, just like going to fight for drugs, all of us, not only this side of Parliament, I ask our colleagues from the other side, as we go out, if anything let us be untied ...

HON. P.K. BALA.- Same here.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- ... to fight corruption. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to combating corruption, as it is a complex issue and often requires a multi-functional approach. A key strategy for preventing corruption is strengthening the anti-corruption laws, enacting and enforcing robust anti-corruption laws to deter corrupt activities.

The primary role of FICAC is to investigate, institute and conduct criminal proceedings against corruption, a mandate it has carried out with distinction since its establishment.

The primary objective of the Commission guided by section 12 of the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption Act No.11 of 2007 is to eradicate corruption. Given the above, the following are objectives adopted by the Commission to successfully carry out its mandated responsibilities:

- Successful investigation;
- Effective prosecution with the presentation of solid evidence;
- Effective education and corruption prevention programmes with the presentation of relevant data; and
- Successful formulation of anti-corruption policies through a series of effective and efficient prevention programmes.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the Commission is continuously challenged to sustain the fight against corruption through greater empowerment and visibility. I wish to highlight, Mr. Speaker, Sir, yes at one point this side of Parliament had some issues about FICAC. The reason being, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because it was promulgated when Parliament was not sitting. A law was brought in first in 2007, there was no wider consultation, yes, but has come over time, there has been set up, there has been awareness, there has been successful prosecutions and today as parliamentarians our role is to fully support the work of FICAC.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to accomplish the desired standards, the current systems, processes and procedures of the institution needs to be consistently reviewed and strengthened. In view of the above, the Commission anticipates an extension to its organisational growth and expansion in the future. As such, the Commission foresees its future to have ascertained stronger brand image and position with its partners and stakeholders.

It must align itself to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals 2015-2030 (SDGs) set by the United Nations (UN), the Commission envisions to strongly uphold its key responsibilities in preventing and combating corruption in the country and assisting the nation to accomplish the set Sustainable Development Goals.

The Commission desires to be an institution which is resourceful and well equipped with tangible and intangible necessities to lead the fight against corruption. Also, it envisages sanctioning the Fijian Constitution in terms of the prevention and the minimisation to assist the Government to rapidly adapt and comply with the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC).

Since its inception, FICAC has conducted a number of corruption prevention activities, national and regional initiatives, investigated a number of complaints received, successfully prosecuted and appealed cases in the High Court, including the Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while it is important to acknowledge the commitment and hard work of our dedicated officers who strive daily to prevent and combat corruption in our nation. It is also significant to ensure the morale and performance of these officers and their IK for.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since 2018, there had been no salary increments for the staff members of FICAC. This prolonged period without financial recognition of their effort was a cause of concern. However, this situation saw a positive change with the new Acting Deputy Commissioner assumed the role in 2023.

With the unwavering support of the Coalition Government, a much needed salary adjustment was implemented, ensuring that the hardworking staff members received their deserved increments. This decisive action was important in acknowledging and valuing the contributions of the officers, thereby, fostering a more motivated and dedicated workforce.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the salary increment was indeed a great news for the staff, and the Commission is committed to ensure that the staff are well catered for. Part of the policy of the Commission in terms of its staff welfare, a comprehensive health insurance covers for officers and

their families; ample opportunities for growth within the organisation and relevant professional training and development programmes. These initiatives are essential in retaining the talented staff members and preventing brain drain.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the most prevalent forms of corruption among public officials have been identified as Causing a Loss and Abuse of Office. In quarter 3 alone, the Commission received 203 complaints across its office in Suva, Lautoka and Labasa. There were 168 complaints from the Central and Eastern Divisions - 14 from the Western and 21 in the Northern Division. Each of these complaint is thoroughly assessed by the State Counsel.

In an effort to provide even a better service to the people of Fiji, FICAC expanded its Investigation Department and the Legal Department in terms of its manpower and resources. The Investigation Department has branched out to Lautoka and Labasa offices, while the Legal Department remain centralised with plans to expand to these branches in the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since the launch of its Strategic Plan, FICAC has established the Economic Crime Unit to expedite and investigate cases involving proceeds of crime, unexplained wealth and civil forfeiture matters. Yesterday, we talked about transnational crimes, that is why it is important for this unit to be set up, to ensure that those cases are properly investigated. This unit is specifically tasked with investigating offences under the Cybercrime Act 2021, in addition to the Proceeds of Crime Act 1997 and unexplained wealth under the Prevention of Bribery Act No. 12 of 2007.

In the last quarter, the Commission's Investigation Department handled a total of 151 cases. Of these, seven cases were charged and taken to court; three cases were submitted for legal opinion; eight cases were submitted for closure and the remaining 133 cases are still under investigation. As we delve deeper into the intricacies of combating corruption, it becomes increasingly evident that this battle requires a united front.

Corruption is an evil multi-faceted and multi-dimensional problem that requires a comprehensive approach, but only in an environment of transparency, accountability and integrity, which the Coalition strives to uphold duly. The Commission needs collaboration, innovation and incentive systems that facilitates cross-sectoral incentives and shared accountability across different Ministries, agencies, levels of Government and non-Government stakeholders. All are required, including the private sector, non-state actors and the general public at large.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to shed some light on the progress made and the challenges that lie ahead. The Commission's commitment to this cause is exemplified through its education and prevention programme. As such, we must recognise that education and prevention efforts are crucial, not only for promoting transparency, accountability and integrity, but they accelerate progress in meeting development goals.

By engaging robustly with the stakeholders across the spectrum, from Government institutions to private enterprises, from communities to youth groups and clubs, from primary schools to tertiary institutions, as well as NGOs and civil society organisations. As technology continues to shape our world, the Commission remains proactive in adapting to these changes. The key initiatives such as the development of an online recruitment portal and online appraisal are being explored to enhance efficiency and address potential delays.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the Commission acknowledge it cannot tackle corruptions single handily the fight against corruption is everyone civic duty. Therefore, stressing the important fact that comparing corruption was the active participation of all members of society to ensure more transparent, efficient and equitable world together with the support of involvement of all stakeholders

we can strive towards our society free from the cycles of corruptions.

The Commission needs sufficient funding to sustain its operation and accommodate changes for the next five years, as highlighted in the Commission Strategic Plan which was launched in February of this year. We also agreed to assist individual officers in different departments their efforts to drive to achieve their KPIs Annual Corporate Plan for 2024-2025.

The Coalition Government place a great emphasis on the importance of never forgetting the grass root communities and those at the outer islands. And, yes, the Coalition Government has positively shown its support towards the Commission in carrying out this role and functions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, unlike the previous Government which often interfered with how the Commission carried out its roles and functions

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- ...causing officers to work under constant fear of termination or dismissal the Coalition Government takes a different approach.. With the Coalition Government, there is commitment to allow independent statutory institutions like FICAC to operate autonomously without interference in a day to day operations.

The Coalition Government respect the staff of these organisations enforce an environment where they can carry out their duties effectively and without undue influence.

Before I conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will refer back to the *Bible*. Galatians 6:8, states and I quote:

“If you plant in the field of your natural desires, from it you will gather the harvest of death; if you plant in the field of the spirit, from the spirit you will gather the harvest of eternal life.”

I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the opportunity to address this august Parliament,

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to give my response to the honourable Attorney-General and the statement on the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I remember during campaign this is the very Government that wanted to abolish FICAC. We have seen this but again he is now praising FICAC. Yesterday, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister Gavoka wanted to talk about the open skies. Few months back he said all this kind of flip-flop politics coming from the other side of Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Bulitavu, can we have this wind of change.

(Laughter)

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. But, again, FICAC was created by back then in the previous administration and I thank the honourable Attorney-General that his eyes is open today to acknowledge the good work of the previous Government. His duty is to continue that good work.

As alluded to by the honourable Prime Minister the other day, a new Government needs to build on the success of the previous government and that has to be the culture. The honourable Prime

Minister specifically said no Government is forever. The good work done by FICAC, the only thing that FICAC needs is more funding. The honourable Attorney-General can ask the honourable Minister for Finance for more funding.

When the honourable Attorney-General was talking about increment to FICAC officials, I saw the honourable Minister for Finance smiling away. But again, I am not saying that because some from the other side are under investigation too but again we need to support the institution. We need to practice what we preach, especially coming from the honourable Attorney-General as the Minister responsible for FICAC.

Also, public knowledge, the honourable Attorney-General too is under investigation under FICAC. But again, if we are to practice what we preach, the *Bible* verse that he had read to us a while ago, we have to stick to the text of the Word. If I were the honourable Attorney-General and Minister responsible for FICAC, I would have given that portfolio away to probably honourable Tikoduadua or the honourable Prime Minister and after my investigation is completed, then that particular portfolio can come back.

(Laughter)

Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are obligations under FICAC. FICAC is an international obligation under the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) and I spoke the other day about the Annual Report for FICAC on the Periodic Review – The Peer Reporting, and I think it is due in June, honourable Attorney-General. I think we need to make our report on the whole review; how are we going to review FICAC and whether FICAC is relevant and how are we going to develop FICAC to combat the objectives that FICAC were made with.

On education and other programmes that are happening, awareness, corruption is everywhere and any government that comes in will be blamed by any Opposition that that particular government, to borrow your words honourable Attorney-General will try to “weaponize” this kind of institution.

However, I hope you do not weaponize these kinds of institutions and let it grow so that we eradicate the very principles that this particular organisation fights for and that is to combat corruption. I thank the honourable Attorney-General again and Minister responsible for FICAC for acknowledging the good works that has been done by the past and also moving forward on why this particular organisation needs to be strengthened.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before I offer the floor to the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry to make his Statement, I would like to acknowledge the presence of a tribe from New Zealand in the North Island known as Ngāpuhi. Their land comprises the areas that were part of the Waitangi Treaty, I am told. So, they are here for some visitation, and we acknowledge your presence here, ladies and gentlemen.

(Acclamation)

Aquaculture Assistance by the Government of Japan

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

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver a Statement on the recent achievement that is foreseen to improve and boost Fiji's capability within the Aquaculture Sector. However, before I address this

matter, I wish to take a short moment to address honourable Usamate's question in this august Parliament on Monday.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Members have raised and I summarise the issue that we were to address our vessels that were tied up along the foreshore here in Suva, due to their parent business becoming non-operational.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji national long line fleet, one of the last standing domestic fleets in the region, is fully operational within Fiji's EEZ and in areas beyond national jurisdictions, that is the high seas and my Ministry is moving to develop the various capacities needed to take the industry into the near future, the element that I have raised in this august Parliament on Monday.

The vessels that the honourable Minister is alluding into Suva's foreshore are foreign vessels that have come to utilise many services that Fiji has to offer, such as bunkering and provision services, scheduled slipway engagements for repairs and maintenance and also to await the change in vessel crews, amidst enjoying the vibrant environment, agriculture that Fiji has to offer.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reiterate that my Ministry is moving to play its part well with the relevant line agencies and industry stakeholders in order to meet this Coalition Government's processes to develop Fiji as a regional hub, poised at meeting these demands and ensuring that they are met more efficiently into the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with your permission, I would like to now transit and deliver a statement on the recent achievement that is foreseen to improve and boost Fiji's capability within the aquaculture sector.

MR. SPEAKER.- Could I just interrupt you for a while there, honourable Minister? What you have just stated is that the ships out here are waiting for the change around of the crews?

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

MR. SPEAKER.- It has really taken a long while.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Some are waiting for maintenance.

MR. SPEAKER.- *Qo e wawa veisau tiko qo se veisau na kai waqa?*

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Yes, some are waiting for maintenance and the slipway to be cleared then their turns are up.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Honourable Usamate, that answers your concern.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, with your permission, I would like to transit and deliver a statement on the recent achievement that is foreseen to improve and boost Fiji's capability within the aquaculture sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe we are all aware of the current assistance rendered to the Fiji Government through the Ministry of Fisheries as part of the collaboration with the Government and People of Japan. Through this assistance, Sir, the Ministry of Fisheries received three excavators and three trucks, made possible by the Japanese Official Development Assistance through this International Cooperation System. Like any responsible Government, our commitment underpins our willingness to improve the livelihood of our people, our economy and our resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I took up office, recognizing the status of existing projects. Through the commitment of the Coalition Government, helped lead to the work of the Ministry of Fisheries to achieve the needed outcomes. The result is now measured with the successful procurement of the excavators and trucks which will boost and drive the achievement of aquaculture aspirations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, allow me to shed light on past aquaculture practices and how the procurement of the Japanese aided machinery address challenges that once affected Fiji's aquaculture growth. Sir, in the past, our service to the aquaculture sector was measured by our ability to:

- Provide technical support;
- Funding of pond construction and start up;
- Feeding supply; and
- Hatchery production for pond stocking.

While these targets and goals seem viable on paper, the Ministry of Fisheries continue to face challenges in operationalizing the aquaculture work plan. One of the underlying reasons was the high cost of pond construction and maintenance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Fisheries has close to 500 aquaculture farmers around Fiji. The hiring of an excavator and trucks for construction and maintenance of ponds cost around \$10,000. The high cost incurred in the pond works, often result in the high cost of pond management and production.

Ideally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is more viable to divert and utilize the funds allocated for pond construction and maintenance to the operational needs and farm management. The re-allocated funds can be used for hatchery production, feed purchases, market access and product enhancement therefore, providing the needed support to enhance the development of aquaculture sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the benefits envisaged are widespread. The Ministry of Fisheries has developed a robust plan to ensure that we maximise the utilisation of these Japanese-aided machineries. First is the strategic placement of excavators and trucks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as aquaculture farms are dispersed across our main geographical divisions, we have developed a relocation plan to have the excavators and trucks relocated to our main aquaculture clusters in the Central, Western and Northern Divisions. This approach will result in the quick turn-around time for pond constructions, enhance the expansion and commercialisation of aquaculture farms, reduce operating costs incurred by current farmers and address the issue of loss of farming interest that lead to dormant ponds and enable the aquaculture farmers to meet local demand and in future, supply the export market, all of which are key development steps, critical to the survival of further development of the aquaculture sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is just the beginning. The future looks extremely bright, with lots of big possibilities. I am committed to progress the aquaculture sector towards the realisation of these big possibilities.

With our collective effort and commitment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will serve our people's needs by:

- provide a reliable source of protein and essential nutrients, contributing to our nation's food security;
- boost economic growth through significant progress from subsistence to semi commercial and fully commercialised aquaculture farms;

- support employment opportunities by creating jobs in farming, processing, distribution and related activities;
- contribute to import substitution and compete against external markets;
- enhance sustainable fisheries by alleviating pressure on wild caught fish;
- achieve diversification in the fisheries sector; and
- boost coastal and rural development.

All of the above are driven towards our commitment to serve our people.

Before I conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was deeply honoured to have officiated at the handing over ceremony. It is a milestone I always dreamt about and have now come to realise as a Minister. Therefore, I would like to re-emphasise our appreciation to the Government and the People of Japan for their continued partnership and support. It is certainly onwards and upwards from here. The onus is now on our people: the team I work with in fisheries and our wide stakeholders and partners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are committed to take the aquaculture sector to bigger heights. Through our commitment, the Ministry of Fisheries is determined to steer Fiji towards a robust aquaculture sector that serves our people, addresses our needs and safeguards our economy for our sustenance and the survival of our future generation.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry for his Statement this morning on aquaculture.

Sir, the discussions on the provision of machinery for aquaculture emanated from the discussions that the machines were brought in from Japan was supposed to be divided between the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Ministry of Fisheries. Unfortunately, in the formation of the Ministry of Waterways, all the machineries were diverted to them.

The machinery as the honourable Minister has stated will be critical for the development of aquaculture. Basically, we ask that it comes with a flat top truck so the digger can be loaded on to the flat top truck and taken to various areas in the Western, Northern and Central Divisions. This is to help new and existing aquaculture farmers.

I would like to encourage the honourable Minister to try and continue the discussions with Korea who had initially agreed to provide a US\$10 million for the development of mariculture in Makogai. These basically to farm non-migratory species, like *donu* and *kawakawa* for the benefit of the maritime islands. Basically, cage farming will also provide the possibility of spawning for high value species like *donu* and *kawakawa*. I am not really sure whether the discussions with Korea is at the moment, but they had initially given the green light for the US\$10 million for the development of Makogai, not only for the maritime islands, but also the coastal islands of Vanua Levu with these high value species. This will greatly develop the stock within our reef system if they spawn within. This is basically practised in South-East Asia and commonly called as cage farming. I would encourage the honourable Minister to try and pursue that because not only it will help, the Japanese Government has helped the Northern, Central and Eastern and Western Divisions, this will help the small islands in the maritime zone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the aquaculture is quite a difficult venture to go into; there has been a lot of failures. We had tried milk fish, we had tried *nuqa* and *kawakawa* in Ra and it is progressing very well. I encourage the honourable Minister so that he continues to develop that. We had a technician who had been with the Ministry of Fisheries for five years. Unfortunately, he has left, but I understand that he had been replaced. Aquaculture in this modern world where there is climate

change, and interruption to the normal system within our waters, pollution is a very good alternative to natural species that live within our waters. I thank the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry for encouraging and continuing with the work within the Ministry of Fisheries and for aquaculture farmers in Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I would like to adjourn Parliament now for lunch, since we have an engagement with the presence of the Ngapuhi Tribe from New Zealand and would like to go and officially or traditionally accept them for their visit here. That will be held in the Small Committee Room, whilst the rest may be going off for lunch or for your further meetings as well. Parliament is now adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.34 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.33 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before we move on to Questions, there is the Under 18 rugby team from Savusavu Secondary Team Under. They are supporting one of their old boy, honourable Ketan Lal. He was a rugby player too?

HON. K.K. LAL.- In the olden days.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Boundary Dispute Between Ra Province and Ba Province (Question No. 77/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts update Parliament on the status of the boundary dispute between the Ra and Ba Provinces?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, *au taura na gauna oqo meu vakavinavinakataki* honourable Niudamu e na taro ka taroga tiko e na yakavi nikua. Au kila ni taro qo e ra kauwai tiko kina vakalevu e levu na veivanua e na yasana vakaturaga o Ra, ka tarogi e na 2022, ka tarogi talega vei keitou ena 2023.

Na i matai ni yalayala ni vanua me baleti rau o Ra kei Ba a veivakadonui e na Bose Levu Vakaturaga mai Waikava Cakaudrove e na 1876.

MR. SPEAKER.- *Waivaka sa Namosi, Turaga Naita. sa kauti kedatou e na rua na vanua o kemuni.*

HON. I. VASU.- *Ena review ni iTaukei Administration a mani mai vakayacori e na 1985. Mai na kena review-taki na iTaukei Administration ya, a mai yaco kina e dua na vakatulewa me review-taki na Boundary Amendment Regulations ni 1991. Koya mai tosoi kina nai yalayala ni qele koya toso tiko kina kina na gauna oqo e na mua ni wavu mai Yaqara.*

Na i yalayala ni qele i liu vei keda, Turaga na Speaker, au kila ni matata vinaka vei kemuni ka na sega ni matata vei ira eso, a davo toka ena yalayala ni qele na boundary ni Kauvoli Freehold, ka voleka e na koro ko Nakorovou ni da sivita na koro ko Tavua ni da gole ki Rakiraki.

Na vei bose ni yasana ko Ra, me vaka au sa vakaraitaka oti ena 2022, e ratou kauwaitaka kina na vanua vakaturaga o Ra me baleta na vanua o Rabulu, e dina ni sa okati tiko kina yasana o Ba, ia se qarava tikoga nona soli vakavanua kina yasana ko Ra. Kei na kena turaga ni koro ena vanua o Rabulu, e veiqaravi ruarua tiko e na yasana o Ba kei Ra. Oya na kauwai levu ka kauwai tiko kina na yasana vakaturaga o Ra. Ni mai ciqomi na kauwai mai na yasana vakaturaga o Ra, e mani vakadaberi kina e dua na komiti me raica na nodratou kauwai na yasana vakaturaga ko Ra.

Na komiti e mai vakadaberi ya, sa mani qarava na veitalanoa e na vanua vakaturaga o Rabulu kei na vanua vakaturaga o Drauniivi, o ira era taukena na qele ena vanua ka da veitalanoataka tiko qo.

E qaravi vakatolu i kea na kena veitalanoa, me ra veivakararamataki me rawa ni laurai na nodra nanuma. Ni sa qaravi oti na tolu na veitalanoa oya, a qai mani lai qaravi na veitalanoa vua na Turaga na Tui Bila, vei ratou na vanua o Bila, na kena vnakati talega me rogoci na nodratou vakasama na vanua vakaturaga o Bila. Ena nona vakasala na turaga tiko vakatawa na Turaga na Tui Tavua ke rawa ni laurai ga edua na kenai wali malumu me laurai kina na kauwai eratou kauwai tiko mai kina na yasana vakaturaga ko Ra. Sa oti ya, sa ma ni gole talega na veivosaki ena vanua vakaturaga o Rakiraki, lai sikovi na Turaga na Tui Navitilevu ena veivosaki vata ga koya qaravi mai vua na Turaga na Tui Bila. Ena veivosaki vua na Turaga na Tui Navitilevu, qai vinakata talega o koya ke laurai e dua na kena gaunisala me na rawa ni wali kina na kauwai e tiko baleta nai yalayala baleta na yasana vakaturaga o Ba kei na yasana vakaturaga o Ra.

Ni oti na nona laurai na Turaga na Tui Navitilevu, a mani gole tale e dua na veitalanoa vua na Yavusa o Nadakana kei na Yavusa o Koro ena vanua o Rabulu. Ni lai qaravi na veitalanoa baleti rau na yavusa qo, erau gadreva o rau ke rawa ni rau se vakarorogo tikoga vakavanua ena vanua vakaturaga o Tavua. Sa mani vakayacori tale edua na bose, mani kerei me dua na bose me na laki vakayacori ena vale ni volavola ni yasana o Ra, ka ra lako kece yani kina na vanua o Rabulu, na Tui Navitilevu, Tui Tavua, kei iratou kece koya e qaravi vei ira na veivosaki mera lai veitalanoataka na kena gaunisala malumu duadua e rawa ni wali kina na kauwai eratou kauwai tiko mai kina na yasana o Ra.

Ni ra sa laki veivosaki, na kena veivakadonui era qarava mai nai otioiti, oya nai ka 12 ni Evereli ena vula sa oti. Na kena veivosaki ke rawa ni survey-taki tale na vanua me laurai na vanua o Nadalani na kena qele. Na kena vanua ya, me laurai na qele ya e tiko evei? Kevaka e tiko, volai ena yasana o Ba, io na vanua o Rabulu ke sa rawa ni vakarurugi tikoga ena vanua o Ba. Kevaka e laurai ni tiko na qele ya ena vanua o Ra, io me qai qaravi tale na kena veiqaravi tekivu ga mai na veivakararamataki tale mai na yasana, kauta cake mai na Tabacakacaka iTaukei, kauta cake ki na Bose Levu Vakaturaga, kina Cabinet me qai vakatulewa kina. Ya beka na veika sa mai qarava tiko na Tabacakacaka iTaukei me baleta na kauwai e kau mai ena yasana vakaturaga ko Ra.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- *Turaga saka na Speaker, au vakavinavinaka saka vakalevu nai sau ni taro mai vua saka na Turaga nai Talai. E dua saka tikoga na vatataro, vua saka tiko mai na vakamacala sa sauma saka tiko mai na Turaga na Minister. Na gauna cava beka e rawa ni vakaoti kina na veika ni sa cauraka saka nikua me baleta na kena gadrevi me rawa ni kuwa ni veivosakitaki vakalevu tiko mai ena loma ni matabose ni yasana o Ra na veika e kau cake sara tiko mai qo? Au kila ni sa dua na bolebole balavu saka tiko ena loma ni yasana o Ra, keimami kerea saka e dua na nomuni veivakadeitaki, erawa ni gauna cava beka sa rawa ni vakaoti kina na veitalanoataki ni veika oqo?*

HON. I. VASU.- *Turaga na Speaker, na qaravi ni tavi oqo sa soli vei ratou na Tabana ni Surveyor ena Tabana ni Veitarogivanua me ratou na qarava. Me vaka ni ratou kerea tiko mai na yasana vakaturaga o Ra, tarogi tiko na yakavi nikua, e sana saga na nonai gu na Tabacakacaka iTaukei me na rawa ni qaravi vakatotolo, lai qaravi tale na veivosaki vei iratou kece na yasana o Ba kei na yasana o Ra me baleta na kena vinakati me wali na kauwai sa ratou kauta saka tiko mai na yasana vakaturaga o Ra.*

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- *Dua saka ga na taro. Turaga Minister, vinaka vakalevu sara nomuni vakamacala. Au vakasamataka toka na veika oni tukuna tiko ni qo sa vaka toka e dua na kauwai levu ena levu ni vanua eda tu kina, na kena dau veitalanoataki na yalayala, na qele eda tiko kina kei ira era dodonu me ra tiko kina. Au vakarogoca toka na nomuni vakamacala, au kila vei ira era vakarorogo tiko mai, era sarasara tiko ena yakavi nikua, eso vei ira sa na gadreva saraga me ra kauta cake mai na veika eda rogoca tu ga, ena noda dau veitalanoa vata kei ira ena veika era rarawataka tu se ra lomatarotarotaka tu ena vuku ni veisei me baleta na yalayala. Na cava mada na kena i tuvatuva se na kena i lakolako dina e dodonu meda na muria ni basika mai na mataqali*

veitalanoa vakaoqo, na veitalanoa ni yalayala, na veitalanoa me baleta na i tikotiko kevaka e sega tu ni dau matata va qo, me vaka e ratou kauta cake tiko mai na wekadatou mai Ra?

HON. I. VASU.- *Vinaka ke tiko e so na kauwai koyā e ratou sa laveta cake mai na yasana vakaturaga o Ra, na kena i qaraqaravi me lako mai ena bose ni tikina, kau ki na bose ni yasana, me kau cake mai me rawa ni mai laurai na veika e baleta na nodra kauwai. E dina sara, keitou lesu mai Kadavu ena macawa rua sa oti, keitou veitalanoataka talega kina e dua na tikina ni qaravi tiko vakavanua ka vakalotu ena dua na tikina ka qaravi vakamatanitu ena duatani tale na tikina. E veitalanoa balavu ni ra cakava baleta ni ra a se cakava tu mai na qase, e dredre ni via dua e tu me tovolea me veisautaka vakasauri. Ena gadrevi sara vakalevu na noda veitalanoa me rawa ni qai qaravi kina vakavinaka.*

Adaptive Social Protection Strategy
(Question No. 78/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics update Parliament on the Adaptive Social Protection Strategy and its Implementation Plan.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. The Adaptive Social Protection (ASP) Strategy and its implementation plan was endorsed by Cabinet in April 2024. The ASP Strategy and the implementation plan aims to assist Government of Fiji to enhance its existing social protection mechanism so that it can offer rapid and timely assistance to poor and vulnerable households particularly to cope with the negative impact of crisis.

The genesis of this strategy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the strategy from 5- Years strategy (2024 to 2029) stems from the measures that were undertaken during COVID, US\$100 million (almost FJ\$200 million) through the World Bank, about \$42 million from DFAT and others made up the volume of social protection support that many households and families received during COVID.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since then the Government in 2022, and obviously from last year, we have been working closely with development partners and local partners to ensure that the strategy is put in place to mitigate the impact of shocks such as natural disasters, economic crisis, including those that may arise from health emergencies.

Under the Social Protection Response System Development Project, the World Bank provided technical and financial support to various activities including the design of the strategy that we now have which was approved by Cabinet and again the financing from the World Bank was secured during COVID and that is being built on for another five years. The total funding, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is expected to be part of the three approaches, particularly the two approaches will amount to about \$294 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the ASP Strategy Plan was developed under the review of a Project Steering Committee led by the Ministry of Finance, together with the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection as the key implementing agency. The approach to formulating the strategy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was based on extensive stakeholder engagement. There were 11 thematic workshops with a total of 229 participants from Government agencies, civil society organisations, development partners, field consultations at national, divisional, provincial, district and community levels were conducted with another 300 participants.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the main idea behind this strategy is to expand particularly in approach one to expand social assistance benefits and to reach disaster hit communities. The important issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with respect to the strategy is to look at how the country is prepared to address the most vulnerable who get affected the most during disasters.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition was talking about poverty, we can argue about the revised poverty rate from 28 percent to 24 percent. But the fact is, honourable Leader of the Opposition that the large percentage, in fact two-thirds of those leaving below the poverty line are usually in the rural areas, and when disasters, particularly natural disasters such as droughts, floods, cyclones hit these areas, these are the people who are affected the most and are the most vulnerable. Therefore, the strategy really is to ensure that these groups of people are addressed first.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I said, there are five priority action areas and I do not want to get into the details of those specific priority areas, but the strategy is a public document, it is available for everyone to see and look at what is there. The point I wanted to make, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the impact of climate change as we all know, Fiji is ranked 15th globally in terms of disaster risk and more and more what we have seen in the last 10 years, it was part of the world in the Pacific, including Fiji.

We hope and pray for six months and probably more than six months now that we do not get hit by a devastating flood or cyclone or other forms of disaster, temperatures, patterns of heavy rain fall have both increased over the past five decades in Fiji.

Climate change has increasingly affected much of the country, including rising seas, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and saltwater intrusion we have seen in many villages and coastal communities and the excessive heat and the damaged crops and natural resources are also adding to the vulnerability of those in that category where this particular strategy in the National Adaptation Social Protection Strategy and Implementation Plan is directed between 2024 to 2029. The honourable Leader of the Opposition was saying the other day, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the important thing is about implementation. We have got the strategy, we have got these priority areas, we have got the action plans, how it is implemented at times of disasters and before disasters, the preparedness will ensure whether this adaptive strategy is going to be effective or not.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Thank you, honourable Deputy Prime Minister for your response. My understanding about social protection is, they are founded on certain principles. One of them is the equality and non-discrimination. How do you ensure these principles are reflected in the implementation plan right throughout because you are saying that the big challenge now is getting the implementation done. The question is, how will you ensure that these key principles of equality and non-discrimination will be part of this plan from the first to the final stage?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I do not know what you exactly mean, but it is assumed that any of those plans or action plans that are there with respect to addressing fundamentally those who would be affected by disasters, there is no room for discrimination. When you are looking at those who are affected in a particular area, if there is a coastal inundation, saltwater intrusion during a certain weather pattern and groups and communities are affected, the strategy is very clear that those vulnerable groups will be provided with the support that they would need. I do not expect and there should never be allowed any form of discrimination in the provision of those protection services, whether it is through cash transfer or to provide support to build infrastructure. It should be on the principle of non-discrimination.

Progress of EFL Extension Grid
(Question No. 79/2024)

HON. T.R. MATASAWALEVU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Works, Meteorological Services and Transport inform Parliament on the progress of the EFL extension grid to Soa Village, Matuku Village, Wailailai in Bucalevu, Nakorotubu, Ra?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the projects in question, Wailailai is completed, Bucalevu is still in progress while Soa and Matuku are yet to start. The total cost of Wailailai Settlement is \$98,000, benefitting 13 households. For Bucalevu Village, grid extension works is completed, and house wiring is planned to commence next month. The total project cost is \$170,000 that will benefit 15 households.

For Soa and Matuku Villages in Ra, the Ministry, through the Department of Energy is processing the final 50 percent payment to Energy Fiji Limited for grid extension works. The total cost of the project is \$713,000, which is planned to commence in August this year. The project is envisaged to benefit a total of 152 customers.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, some communities, like Uluisavudua in Sawani, Naitasiri, and those living in the villages of Natua, Vunidamoli, Laucala and Naiqai in Wailevu West, Cakaudrove have also been waiting. Is this the same programme that they come under or is there another programme because they have been waiting since September last year where they were told that the grid will be extended too. Again, this year, the same story. I just want to know whether it is the same programme so that people know while they are waiting for confirmation from the Department of Energy?

(Honourable Member interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, when the honourable Minister has given his reply, then you may rise to ask your supplementary question.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is a totally new question because right now, we are at the Wainibuka River and I do not know why you brought up those areas which are not around there. There is a limited budget but all those requests ...

(Hon. K.K. Lal interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Could we let the honourable Minister reply?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- The requests are there, I am not sure about the status of it. Definitely, as a Government which is concerned about social development, social equity and development for all rather than specific which are targeted towards your voters, it is all there, we will follow up on that. You can contact me separately and I will follow up on that.

The extension of the grid is very costly. Normally we will look at the number of households and beneficiaries so there are some cost benefit analysis. We cannot extend it if it costs half a million and there are just three houses there. That is the kind of consideration that needs to be considered. The other one is the limited budget, but we are working with development partners through UNDP and also KOICA to expand the Rural Electrification Fund.

HON. T.R. MATASAWALEVU.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Minister for what has been mentioned about Wailailai in Bucalevu, Ra. He has not been mentioned about the EFL Extension Grid in Bucalevu.

MR. SPEAKER.- There is another Wailailai in Wailoku.

HON. T.R. MATASAWALEVU.- This Wailailai is in Bucalevu in Ra. Nothing has been done to the EFL Extension Grid right now.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, the honourable Member is referring to Wailailai in Wainibuka.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Yes, I will look into that and get back to you on that information.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, still on grid extension because there are certain names mentioned and there are some more. This was just a claim when I tried to get Dakunimoto in Tabia connected. Some people claim as soon as NFP comes into the picture, they will have it done in year's time. Sir, it is one year and six months. Just a clarification, when are those people going to get their houses connected to the grid extension?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I mean that is also a concern when I came in, the length of waiting time. I have asked the Director of Energy to review it and as I mentioned, budget is not a problem but is limited.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Our people are waiting, when we come back in 2027 then we will connect it.

MR. SPEAKER.- We can just let them wait until 2027.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- The Rural Electrification Fund needs to be expanded. So, that is why we are working with other development partners to look into expanding that; not only for the grid but also renewable energy.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister has mentioned twice limited budget and the honourable Minister for Finance has said he has got money. I thank the honourable Minister for his answers. It is good that you understand now that grid extension is very costly because when you were on this side and we were on that side, you would ask the same question.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Who was that side?

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are some households along King's Road, the wires are already there since 2023 but not being connected to the grid and they were already being funded.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It was still right from Baulevu.

HON. V. NATH.- You listen. Funds have already been provided for the projects but they are not linking to the grid. Can you tell honourable Minister when will that be done?

MR. SPEAKER.- Are you asking the honourable Minister or you engaging in other....

HON. V. NATH.- Honourable Minister.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- First of all, thank you honourable Member, he should refrain from pointing. I do not know whether it is hypertension or something because he keeps jumping up and pointing. The second point is, he was the Assistant Minister for the Ministry. He knows all the details and those delays were from your time. I am just there to catch up on the work left by the former honourable Minister and his Assistant Minister, but I thank him.

We were in the Economic Affairs Committee, so we were cooperating really well and I thank him for his question. He was the Chairman of that Committee and in every report we always support him. Going back to the electrification, we went to Nasau Village in Ra, there was a whole lot of lamp posts and wires, et cetera, sitting there and we asked them as to why those were sitting there? They replied, “That is from the FijiFirst Government time and just before the elections, they diverted the contractors to the supporters.” That is something we will need to rectify as we move forward.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

Plans to Improve Workers Compensation System
(Question No. 80/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations update Parliament on plans to improve the workers compensation system in order to deliver better social justice to the workers in Fiji?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir and I thank the honourable Kiran for her question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would just like to update this august Parliament on the proposal to transfer cases from Accident Compensation Commission of Fiji (ACCF) to the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations as endorsed by the Interim ACCF Board. The purpose is to expedite the processing and pay out compensation in a timely manner, as well as making it cost effective.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the recent deaths that have occurred during and in the cause of employment until 31st December, 2018 are investigated by my Ministry under the Workmen’s Compensation Act which is a faulty-based system. To determine the cause of injuries and deaths upon completion of investigations, reports are submitted to trained medical assessors for their expert opinion, assessment to determine the status of each case. Once a medical report is received and the percentage of disability is awarded to the workers, or medical opinion stated that the death was work related, then the Ministry calculates the compensation amount and forwards it to the employers for the payment of compensation to the workers concerned or the dependants as the deceased to workers. This is for all cases that had occurred prior to 2018.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the financial year 2022-2023, my Ministry has successfully settled 208 cases, consisting of 172 injuries and 36 death cases. For the current financial year, as of 30th April, 2024, a total of 109 cases, 91 injuries and 18 death cases had been settled.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the five key players in the administration of the Workmen’s Compensation Act are:

1. Employers;
2. Workers;
3. Medical practitioners;

4. Employment Relations Tribunal; and
5. Ministry of Employment.

While the Ministry is tasked to investigate the injuries and deaths that occur and affect the workers, a professional opinion of the medical assessor is vital in determining our outcome - the outcome of any compensation case.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as at 30th April, 2024, the Ministry had 305 pending cases of which 230 are injury cases and 75 are death cases. The Ministry is endeavoring to make sure that all these cases are disposed off by 31st December, 2024. Majority of them, of course are with the Employment Relations Tribunal and some are those that we are still trying to locate the victims.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, further to this, the Ministry has currently engaged, in consultation with the relevant stakeholders to transfer the cases from the ACCF to the Ministry. These are the cases currently handled by the ACCF under the No Fault Scheme from 1st January, 2019.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry has been the enforcement arm of ACCF regarding employment accidents, since its establishment in 2019. The ACCF was established in 2019. My Ministry has been assisting ACCF with investigation of cases, dealing with complaints on non-payment of wages of injured workers and conducting meetings with employers on reporting of cases.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition, my Ministry has the entire machinery to deal with worker's compensation cases where the staff have undergone relevant training and standard operating procedures are in place to deal with these cases effectively and expeditiously.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the proposal to transfer the processing of the employment and school accident was submitted to Cabinet and the decision is pending as further consultation is required for Cabinet's consideration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to inform this august Parliament that the interim ACCF Board has been approved by Cabinet and my Permanent Secretary has been appointed the interim Chairperson. The Interim Board Members have been tasked to conduct an independent review of the Commission that had the first meeting on 19th April, 2024. Sir, I am happy to report that 264 pending cases have been approved for payment by the interim Board. This comprises of 131 employment cases, 115 motor vehicle accident cases and 18 cases of school accidents. These pending cases on ACCF have been resolved by the interim Board and payment of \$1,237,500 have been made to those that qualify under the No Fault Scheme, Sir.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, you have pointed out what the Ministry of Employment is actually going to take over with respect to ACCF. Is it correct that you are obviously looking at dis-establishing the entire ACCF and functions with respect employment and schools will go to you and the rest will go to the LTA? Whilst on the topic, Sir, do you not think that it would be a conflict of interest for the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Employment to be sitting as the Chair of the ACCF currently?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- The Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Employment is the Chair and that appointment was made by the Office of the Attorney-General which is the appointing authority.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think he has answered your question.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Half of it, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- What? Should be one question only.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the first one was the question that this is heading towards the complete dis-establishment of the ACCF.

MR. SPEAKER.- You want to reply to that, honourable Minister?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my apology. Can the question be repeated?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Sir. Is it correct, honourable Minister, that in light of what you have actually advised Parliament now that the proposal is that the ACCF be completely dis-established and the functions with respect to the education and employment will go to the Ministry of Employment and the rest will go to LTA?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is not the case. The ACCF is there. The Accident Compensation and the school accidents are being passed onto us. The Interim Board is going to look at the entire process, the consultation with the Ministry of Works is still ongoing in terms of how LTA cases are going to be handled. As it is, LTA still stays with ACCF.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Alvick Maharaj, your supplementary question?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a clarification. When the ACCF came into the picture, all the cases were supposed to be referred to ACCF under the no fault policy. Does the Board have the powers to reverse these cases back to Workmen's Compensation, because I think the ACCF Act has not been amended by Parliament. So the cases are referred to ACCF according to the Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before the cases are referred to the Workmen's Compensation with the Ministry of Employment, the Act needs to be changed, because I do not believe the Board has those powers because it will be an issue if it is done without amending the law. At the moment, they should be compensated at no fault policy, that is why it is being referred to ACCF.

MR. SPEAKER.- You are asking, does the Board have the powers?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Yes, according to the Act.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the powers of the Board under the Act are as follows:

1. To assist ACCF in the assessment of the current and pending applications for compensation with the Commission.
2. Approve an application for compensation after reviewing all relevant information.
3. Prescribe the amount of compensation payable to personal injury or death under the no fault compensation scheme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as stipulated under section 11(1) of the ACCF Act and I quote: "The Commission may in writing, either generally or particularly, delegate any of its powers, authority, duties and functions to its officers, employees, agents or consultants as it thinks fit."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Interim ACCF Board is an independent Board, had its first meeting on 19th April, 2024 and made the following decisions:

1. Non-renewal of the ACCF CEO's contract which had expired in January.

2. Appointment of the interim officer in charge to oversee daily operations of the ACCF.
3. Appointment of interim ACCF Secretariat.
4. Appointment of interim Chair (already there) to clear all cases pending with ACCF.
5. Review the renewal of LTA's contract with ACCF - it remains with ACCF.
6. Non-renewal of Veritas Finance Private Limited claims agent for ACCF contracts and processing of employment and school accidents will be done by my Ministry.

The Board has decided that Veritas, the company that had been contracted by ACCF for \$900,000 a year to just process is not being engaged anymore. So we are going to save \$900,000 a year for government because my Ministry has the full capacity to actually process those and then pass them back to ACCF for approval.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Minister. I think that takes care of all your questions, honourable Maharaj. Does the Board have the powers? That has been fully explained by the honourable Minister which are the delegated authorities.

(Hon. A.A. Maharaj interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- He is reading from the Act.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am just quoting from what transpired in this Parliament when the Accident Compensation Commission Act was approved that once all the pending cases with the Workmen's Compensation Team is done, all the clauses there in the law to govern that particular department would be repealed. They do not have the mandate of the Parliament at this point in time to continue with any new cases. That is why the ACCF was developed in the first place. So, the ACCF Board

MR. SPEAKER.- We are talking about delegated authority here and I hope you understand, honourable Maharaj, you have been here for quite some time. That is the legislation, the empowerment that is now being read out by the honourable Minister and we will leave it at that.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is very important because we have had a lot of people come up to our office. Honourable Minister, can you explain exactly why claimants who have been completely processed still have not been paid, whether it be, I think there are claimants there from an education and employment perspective, they still have not been paid. I understand there may be some difficulties with the Board but now you are saying that there is a Board there but they have not been paid. Can you explain why they still have not been paid?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, once again I wish to thank the honourable Member for the question. The pending cases were there from the beginning of 2022. There were around 1,000 cases pending then. When the Board took over, there were 1,447 cases. The Board has now, as I have alluded to earlier, done the first lot.

There are 20 others that they are approving this week and the approval is continuing as processing is taking place. There is processing and there is approval by the Board. There are challenges, of course. One of the challenges is getting the services of trained doctors who actually assess impairment. Those are some of the challenges, otherwise since this interim Board has come in, they have sped up the actual processing.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the fact that when you set up your budget last year, you did not include the processing of these cases. I am wondering how are you funding this, or is your Ministry then being paid by the ACCF to do this?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my predecessor, honourable Usamate was also the Minister at one time. He knows very well that we have a Directorate -the Director of Occupational Health and Safety Board. There is a Board, a Director in the Ministry, and a full set of staff within the Ministry who were processing in the past, until ACCF was given birth to and it was hived away.

We have the trained staff, we have SOPs, we have the ability and we have been doing three-quarter of the work anyway. It was just the processing and then Veritas. We have calculated and the cost is going to be reduced by 70 percent if we take over everything.

Assistance to Cane Farmers - Land Lease Renewals
(Question No. 81/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry update Parliament on how the Ministry plans to assist cane farmers obtain land lease renewals on leases that are expiring?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the question by honourable Virendra Lal and thank him for this important question.

We are all aware of the challenges faced by the sugar industry as we listened to the debate on the motion by the honourable Tubuna on Tuesday. One, of course, is related to the challenges in accessing good agricultural land including lease expiry and competing demand of land for the alternative use of sub-residential, commercial business developments and land needed by the landowning units themselves for daily use and support the maintenance as such. Completion for this land has been an impediment to cane production and in sugarcane fields.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite the challenges we have been very supportive in improving the livelihoods of the sugarcane farmers to its service delivery and direct financial support to the farmers with grants and subsidies. Sir, one of the financial support is to the grant assistance for land acquisition and lease renewals to establish cane farms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, between 2018 and 2020, the Ministry spent a total of \$1.52 million to assist 267 farmers inclusive of 46 female farmers for the payment of 100 percent of the lease renewal cost and purchase of new farms with a maximum grant of \$10,000 per farmer. These farmers were also registered with cane planting grants and input subsidies to established farmers.

In this financial year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a total of \$2 million has been allocated under the new farmers and lease renewal programme to assist with the payment of their lease renewals and purchase of farm costs. The Ministry is covering one-third on a maximum of \$7,500, whichever is lower of the lease renewal cost on the purchase of farm. As of last week, we have received 163 applications and so far 95 farmers have signed the agreement with the Ministry to receive funding for the leases for the cane farmers.

Majority of these farmers, Mr. Speaker, Sir, were from Vanua Levu, mainly from Seaqaqa cane belt areas and have been assisted with a total of \$0.4 million for the payment of lease renewable cost. The rest of the applications are being assessed by the Ministry and the farmers will be assisted before the end of this financial year.

To add on, Mr. Speaker, Sir, majority of the cane is grown under leased land which has been leased from the iTaukei Land Trust Board. According to the information obtained from iTLTB, a total of 1,609 cane leases will be expiring between 2024 to 2031 both, in Viti Levu and Vanua Levu.

My Ministry, together with the industry stakeholders: the Fiji Sugar Corporation, Sugar Cane Growers Council, Sugar Cane Growers Fund have been working in close collaboration with iTLTB to assist both, the cane farmers and the landowners.

These sugar industry institutions have established a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with iTLTB to share useful information on the sugar industry and have been at the forefront to resolve the lease-related issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the iTLTB Chairman has been in consultation with the landowners and the cane farmers regarding these lease renewals for mutual benefit of both parties. Farmers are no longer required to wait for the lease to expire in five years, but they can start consultation within 10 years before it expires. This will bring confidence for the continuity of not only the farmers but the sugar industry as a whole.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have appointed the Chief Executive Officer of iTLTB on the Board of the Fiji Sugar Corporation, who will assist and better understand the needs of the sugar industry in terms of the land requirements firsthand. Mr. Nata will be able to discuss issues of the landowners and iTLTB directly with the FSC Board and management. In this way, Sir, we will be able to develop strategies with iTLTB and serve the needs of both the landowners, tenants and our sugarcane farmers as well.

By understanding of the situation, both the cane farmers and landowners and the sugar industry, we can initiate better dialogue between both parties. We want to invite the landowners and young *itaukei* youth, including women to venture into sugarcane farming, a sector that is becoming favorable with the rise of world sugar price. There is no need to struggle in searching for sugarcane markets as the market is already established.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I had informed this august Parliament that the sugar price is currently quite favorable and likely to remain positive in future years as we see the global trends, therefore, I also encourage our landowners to take this opportunity to venture into cane farming and make use of their land for income generation. And importantly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are ready to provide assistance to them through our grant-programmes to become cane farmers of tomorrow.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, over 90 percent of iTLTB leases have been issued for 30 years and deemed short for investment in the agriculture sector, particularly, for growing of cane, which is a permanent crop. I am thankful that iTLTB has considered offering leases on a longer term as an option, especially for 50 years or 99-year lease term. This will give sufficient time for farmers to recoup returns for their investments.

I am grateful that honourable Vasu had supported the issuing of leases on a longer-term lease for cane farming, and that benefits both the farmers and landowners and contributes to wider economic development, and I thank honourable Vasu for his vision.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government had also established a Task Force on renewals, chaired by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance. In September 2023, the Task Force has submitted its report to the Cabinet with various solutions proposed. One of the key findings was the difficulties faced by both sugar and non-sugar farmers in paying their outstanding lease premiums.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a request was made for the government to assist these farmers to allow them to continue farming. Based on Cabinet's approval, our Coalition Government has paid over \$1.22m for 218 leases as payment for the outstanding lease premiums. Of these 218 leases, 42 leases were for cane farmers and this has supported them to increase cane production and enhance long-term sustainability of the industry.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this government and my Ministry is in full support of assisting cane farmers whose leases expired in previous years and we will continue to support others whose leases are about to expire in the near future. Consultations and dialogue are ongoing and have become better overtime. I fully trust that majority of the leases expiring will be renewed to allow farmers to carry on with sugarcane farming for the betterment of the sugarcane sector and livelihoods of nearly 20 percent of Fiji's population. Thank you, Sir.

HON. V. LAL.- The honourable Minister is talking mostly about itaukei land. Sir, what about those farmers who are tenants of freehold landlords and their leases have expired? Why I am saying this, Sir, is because I come from Rakiraki where there is a big piece of freehold land and the tenant leases have expired and they are cane farmers. So, what happens in that case?

MR. SPEAKER.- It is quite difficult to get freeholders because they are owners in perpetuating. You will get me, of those parcels of land under them. The authority rests with them, whether they want an extension or renewal. Then that can be conveyed to them but I think what the honourable is referring to is where the Government can interact easily because of them being kind of a cozy government, the iTaukei Land Trust Board.

HON. V. LAL.- It is the then laws in fact are asking for substantial amount of premium and that is where the problem is because these farmers are unable to pay the premium so in that case, my question is, is the honourable Minister or is the government going to have those farmers as well?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will give examples to the honourable Member. I was talking to this freehold owner, the late Mr. Uday Singh in Ba. His families are willing to give the land out to the farmers and they are trying to identify farmers who is going to come and work on the farm and motivate. So, it is a question between the negotiation of both parties, if they come to a figure and our formulas stands, honourable Member is that, about 30 percent was owned by the 500. That is the maximum ceiling we can give at this stage, but we are quite happy to deal with any landowners whether it be freehold or state land.

MR. SPEAKER.- Perhaps, further to that honourable Virendra Lal, that was the great thing about Agricultural Landlord and Tenants Act (ALTA). It took care of all tenancies whether it is within freehold, State land or what. The controlling law there was ALTA; ALTA kind of superseded the Native Land Trust Act. Your Government in the past, I do not know what they have done with ALTA, I really do not know what is the full effect of ALTA now. Maybe they have cushioned them down or watered it down, so that now affects tenants. They may be regarded as ALTA tenants because their predominant use is agricultural use. That is where ALTA comes and kicks in, but now we do not know.

(Inaudible interjection)

MR. SPEAKER.- It depends on the owner and the tenant. I hope I am answering that concern of yours. Maybe the honourable Attorney-General can explain what is the fate of ALTA now, is it still in existence or not? Sorry about that honourable Alvick.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question. What was actually discussed yesterday with the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs. Let us *per se* if we had some sitting tenants who are actually cultivating sugar which is at the moment State freehold and during this process, while the lease is still there, it gets converted to iTaukei land.

(Chorus of interjections)

No, no, just listen to the question first. If that transpires and a premium has to be paid to iTLTB for a new lease under iTLTB, who actually pays for that? Will it be the farmers or will the Ministry of Sugar step in to help the farmers

MR. SPEAKER.- That is why I was asking about the fate of ALTA. You know what the Labour Government used to say before, you have entrenched legislation for the Fijian interest, that is our entrenched legislation for the cane farmers and farmers alike under ALTA. This is the second time you have raised that issue, honourable Maharaj. It is up to you honourable Minister.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, since honourable Alvick Maharaj stood up, you have helped me answering a lot of questions on that, so I leave it at that.

(Laughter)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on ALTA if I remember correctly, it is still in existence but subject to review. The reason being, because of the situation that most of the leases expired from 1997; you fully understand that, Sir. There was an urgent need to renew the leases. That is why the Government then went into the Committee for Better Utilisation of Land (CBUL), but if you look at the first CBUL paper when Parliament is back on, we had to review ALTA. My question to the honourable Minister is, it seems that now two systems are running in parallel. You are still using CBUL as a mode of payment and you have just released the last payment and now it has brought up CBUL, the 4 percent subsidy to \$101 million, but you still have another Land Committee. So, where does that leave the CBUL Taskforce that was established to look at the same issue - the renewal of leases?

MR. SPEAKER.- Before you answer that, honourable Leader of the Opposition, the law is law. If ALTA overrides Native Land Trust Act, then automatically ALTA is the ruling one. But in this respect, as I have stated, I do not know, and you have answered that quite well now that it is still in existence. CBUL is not ALTA, let us be clear about that. With the expiry of leases that have gone through and nothing was done to them, then that means clearly those very important sections of ALTA has also been watered down because ALTA guarantees the protection of the interest of tenants, whether they be under Native Land, State Land or Freehold Land.

Mr. Jai Ram Reddy used to have a lot of preceding cases on testing the power of ALTA, even poultry farming in Vitogo, that came under ALTA, but NLTB thought it was a special commercial intensive use. No, it fell under the ambit of ALTA because the courts decided in favour of Jai Ram Reddy's plea. That is the full effect of this, honourable Leader of the Opposition.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Sorry, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is exactly my point. ALTA is in existence. From 1997, despite the existence of ALTA, the leases were not renewed.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Who was ruling in the past 16 years?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No, that is not true!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- *Oso!*

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- It is difficult to explain this.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is why the under the Chaudhry Government (Labour Government) started the resettlement. There was a Ministry of Sugar, Agriculture and Land Resettlement. That was why Navovo was established in Nadroga, Navudi was established in Dreketi, we have Raiwaqa, Vakabalea and Valelawa because of the non-renewal of leases. Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, ALTA was in existence, but it was the politics then that did not renew the leases.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- How many leases did you people renew?

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- That is why CBUL was just formed to renew the leases with the top-up subsidy from the 6 percent UCV to 10 percent to entice the landowners to quicken the process of the renewal of leases.

MR. SPEAKER.- But actually with CBUL coming in, it made ALTA redundant.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- No.

MR. SPEAKER.-No, I am telling you because I worked all my life in that particular organisation.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Let us look at the papers.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Attorney-General, you want to make some comments as well?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to enlighten Parliament, land under ALTA, when the lease expires, if you have any issue, you go to the tribunal. So, I cannot understand why leases were not renewed. There is a legal recourse there - the tribunal and still sits there. So ALTA still exists, there is a recourse for tenants.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you. We will leave it at that, honourable Members. The key Minister to reply to this is the Minister for Sugar, but I have tried to come in to help, and now the honourable Attorney-General has fully explained that. The tribunal is still there.

(Question No. 82/2024 withdrawn)

Social Welfare Management Information System
(Question No. 83/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection inform Parliament as to how the \$1million allocation in this financial year for the Social Welfare Management Information System has been utilised?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. In late 2022, there was a partnership with the Australian Government and a flagship programme which is the Partnerships for Social Protection Programme (P4SP). We undertook the review of the six social assistance schemes under the Department of Social Welfare, which you are aware of.

Following that extensive consultation, in May 2023, there was a technical review report produced and then endorsed by Cabinet. Of course, that review had recommendations for changes that needed to happen.

The following are some of the key achievements in the current budget year:

1. An increase of the monthly benefit amounts by the Coalition Government for all those six areas.
2. There was a conversion of the food voucher to cash to simplify the programme delivery and also in meeting the needs of the beneficiaries.
3. There was a reduction of voucher printing and transition to electronic payments with Post Fiji.
4. There was a review of the Standard Operating Procedures for all of the six social assistance schemes.
5. We obtained Cabinet approval on the shock responsive initiative, such as the adaptive social protection strategy, which honourable Professor Prasad just talked about.
6. There was design and development of an interim IT Management Solution.

In addition, there are currently a few activities underway by the Ministry, and we are hoping that there will be progress in this regard:

1. A consideration of the possible conversion of the Bus Fare Assistance Scheme to cash for our pensioners and our disability beneficiaries.
2. We are looking at the revival (as I have talked about) of the Welfare Graduation Programme in terms of providing a sustainable pathway, which we are working with certain Ministries including the Ministry of Agriculture who talked about that in his Ministerial Statement this morning on how to alleviate poverty. We are identifying those from the Social Welfare Scheme or the Family Assistance Scheme to be graduated under that Programme in the Ministry of Agriculture.
3. We also need to review and update the proxy means test, the test for Family Assistance Scheme, engaging a Management Information System (MIS) firm to develop a comprehensive and strategic solution.

One of the core recommendations, Mr. Speaker, of the technical review, as in your question, is the Integrated Beneficiary Management System. It is a more elaborate system for the social assistance schemes. This is being developed by the Ministry with the support of our development partners. It will establish integration with existing databases and information systems to be managed by Government and other external stakeholders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, once it is established, it will be addressing the following three objectives:

1. improve efficiency, cost savings and sustainability through the sharing of resources;
2. enabling effective provision of the social protection services; and
3. improving transparency and accountability.

However, while this solution represents an impressive achievement for Fiji, the technical review identified gaps in the areas of data management, the digitisation of the beneficiary data and data protection, which all needed priority attention.

Some of the Ministry's online systems crashed in the year 2020 and some processes were reverted back to manual although trying to transition to digital. Therefore, in 2024, we have to come up with an interim solution in order to digitise that information. Honourable Premila Kumar, is complaining. This is where the budget is going to the \$1 million, which is the question.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- You haven't used the money.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- It is part of the interim solution to this point.

Mr. Speaker, the interim solution includes the utilising of this budget which we engaged USP students to come and assist the Ministry in the different Divisions to undertake the processing from manual to digital.

Mr. Speaker, there has been significant support provided by DFAT, the Government of Australia in terms of the solutions. But, Mr. Speaker, in terms of the comprehensive solution, we do need to engage specialist roles which is the Principal MIS consultant, the Senior MIS Consultant, Developers, an IT Team Lead, Social Protection Specialist, Economists and Project Managers. Of course, this has been a great saving too for the Ministry because our development partners have come in to assist. That is the answer to your question, honourable Kumar, in terms of whether it is completely being used.

It is essential, Mr. Speaker, to reserve sufficient funds, to ensure a thorough completion of this project. So, we have requested from the Ministry of Finance, whatever the balance that we have to transfer it into the new year so that we can continue to work with our development partners to be able to realise this.

The simple answer is, Mr. Speaker, we could have utilised all of the \$1 million in this current financial year but our development partners have come to the table, so we have shared this cost. So, we are asking for the balance to be transferred into the new year with our development partners to continue to work on this integrated comprehensive solution.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister needs to learn from honourable Deputy Prime Minister because he answered his question so well when he was talking about the Financial Management System. And when you compare her response to him, a similar question about a system, she went around – beating around the bush, telling us where, what happened, this and that, but the simple question is, honourable Minister, that you have actually not used the money for the system. You have used the money for other things but not to build the system. The money was allocated for the system. So, that is the question. Own up!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- I am sorry, Mr. Speaker, I do not understand whether that was a question or a comment, but I do want to reiterate that the budget is being utilised in partnership with our development partners who have come to the table to work together. So, it has been partly used with our development partners because they are the ones that reviewed the system. The Government of Australia offered to the Ministry, so we have taken that funds with our funds working together and the balance of it to be transferred to next year to be used in partnership with the Government of Australia to continue to develop this and to complete this integrated system.

(Hon. P.D. Kumar interjects)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, I do want to say rather than commenting that way, the previous Government with honourable Kumar should really take credit because this started in their time. So, we are just carrying out what they have put together. So, I acknowledge the good work that

they have done, rather than attacking how the partnerships are working with our bilateral partners to deliver to our people.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have a simple question to the honourable Minister. When the budget was requested for \$1 million allocation, it must have had a list of activities, projects and programmes that were associated with it. As we reach this point in time with the next budget around the corner, are we on track to receive 100 percent of all the things for which this money was allocated for?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- I believe I have answered that question. It has been partially utilised and we are requesting the Ministry of Finance that it goes into the next year. So, it is actually a bit of savings for us because of the support of the Government of Australia to come to the table to be able to contribute to the funding of this system. That is all it is.

In terms of what they are commenting on that we have not utilised it, therefore, we are not delivering it, we are delivering. It is a partnership, and they should acknowledge that. We thank the Government of Australia for their partnership.

Recognition of Indigenous Arts and Craft
(Question No. 84/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts update Parliament on the action taken to improve the recognition of indigenous arts and craft, and also the contemporary art?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to honourable Vanawalu's question, and I thank the honourable Member for his question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's art sector has enormous potentials. Yet, over the years, it has been the most neglected. Our Ministry is focusing on delivering practical and impactful actions that will enhance this creative sector.

As I speak our National Organising Committee based at the Fiji Arts Council is preparing a 100 member Fijian delegation made up of traditional and contemporary artists and artisans, to participate at the upcoming 13th Festival of Pacific Arts and Culture in Hawaii on 6th June to 16th June, 2024. At this Festival, our artists and artisans will achieve maximum exposure at the international stage, sell their works of art to international buyers and most importantly, learn from other artists and artisans in the region.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for years, our artists have been looking for homes, a space where they are able to express themselves freely and collaborate with fellow Fijian artists. With Cabinet approval in 2023, we were able to secure the old St. Steven's Building to be Fiji's first National Art Galley - the new home for our artists and artisans. A National Task Force made up of skilled professionals and technical people in the areas of arts and heritage is now working on the gallery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge our past leaders for establishing a national institution responsible for art in Fiji, the Fiji Arts Council. Established as a charitable trust with an annual grant received from Government, Fiji is the only Pacific Island country that has an arts council. The Fiji Arts Council continues to build on existing support for the development of indigenous and contemporary arts alike.

In 2021, through the United Nations Informal Economies Recovery Project implemented by International Labour Organization (ILO) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) visual artists joined force to establish the Viti Association of Visual Artists (VAVA) with performing artists coming together and help create the Fiji Islands Dance Association (FIDA). This is in addition to the one of the existing and oldest art collectives in Fiji, the Performing Rights Association (FIPRA).

Those collectives are working with the Fiji Arts Council to explore ways to increase opportunities for informal sector enterprises and workers to influence decision-making of Government and policy through a collective formalised voice. This also includes working towards improved access to social safety net and professional development for artists and artisans.

In this regard, the Fiji Arts Council has, in the recent past, provided support letters for established art entrepreneurs to access grants and loans from credit facilities, like the Fiji Development Bank. A handful have succeeded.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure that art is enjoyed by all, the Fiji Arts Council and its key partners organise community workshops on basic art skills, such as screen printing, *masi* making and visual arts programme for youth and children.

The Fiji Arts Council works with the iTaukei Institution of Language and Culture to organise and implement indigenous art revitalisation, such as the *tuli kuro* workshop. The reviving of the *Wea* Fish Trap used by the people of Lasakau, Bau; the *mahima* (salt) making revival workshop in Nadroga, and many others.

The Fiji Museum also work in collaboration with the Fiji Arts Council and other partners to ensure that its exhibitions programme display indigenous skills in heritage and art. In particular, the new Voyages Exhibition at the Fiji Museum has drawn attention, not only from locals, but international museums and visitors alike, with over 60,000 visitors visiting the Exhibition since its opening in December 2022.

In 2023, the visiting Maori Contemporary Artists from New Zealand collaborated with the Fiji Museum and Fiji Arts Council to organise pottery and *masi* design workshops as part of a trail connecting our communities through these art pieces.

Through partnerships with the Ministry of Women, we continue to support our women in the development of their craft and its sales during the National Women's Expo.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department of Culture and the Fiji Arts Council organise ongoing business and entrepreneurship training for skilled artists and artisans, who would like to establish their own business. We are also working with the Ministry of Education to assist our master artists and artisans in allowing them to teach basic art lessons in schools. This complements the current move by the Ministry to ensure that indigenous skills and knowledge systems are embedded in our National Education Curriculum.

Through the Department of Culture, we are currently engaging seven retired Curriculum Advisors and former teachers to map our existing curriculum and to gauge extent with which culture, heritage and arts issues are reflected in learning and teaching materials used in our schools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the protections of our artists is crucial, to ensure proper safeguarding of the creative knowledge and innovation through the Ministry of Trade's Fijian made initiative.

The Fiji Art Council assesses works of art submitted by Fijians to ensure the highest of quality is produced before they are issued with a licence and branded 'Fijian crafted' sticker. This serves as an authentication mechanism for locally produced works of heritage and arts.

Our current intellectual property regimes fall short of protecting our artists' works, especially those that are community owned. In this regard, the pending Traditional Knowledge and Expression of Culture Bill will ensure that indigenous art forms with communal genesis can be protected.

On the other hand, we are proposing in the new financial year to work with the Office of the Attorney-General, to undertake a feasibility study on the possibility of developing a specific legislation for art development in Fiji.

To cover the works of the Fiji Arts Council and gaps that currently exist in relation to protection for our indigenous and contemporary artists and artisans alike. In as far as policy is concerned, Cabinet approved in May 2023, the adoption and implementation of the new Fiji National Cultural Policy. Priority 3 of the Policy emphasises the need to establish a national strategy for creative industries to -

1. strengthen the capacity and skills of cultural producers and practitioners;
2. improve the quality and diversity of cultural products and services;
3. increase the access and visibility of cultural products and services in local, regional, and international markets;
4. promote the recognition and protection of cultural rights and intellectual property of cultural producers and practitioners; and
5. foster collaboration and coordination among stakeholders in the cultural sector, including Government, private sector, civil society and development partners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to support the arts and creative sector, as this can be a source of employment generation for our communities and our people. This will boost their livelihood and foster economic growth and wealth for the nation. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.— Thank you, honourable Minister. That was quite a lengthy one. I would like to humbly ask, honourable Ministers, when you do your replies, please, have it concise, very short and sweet, otherwise its more or less a statement coming up.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.— Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the complementary facility or institute in our drive to preserve our arts is a national art gallery. Fiji does not have a national art gallery, but other countries have. Does the Ministry or the Government have plans to set up a national art gallery that will entice all these artisans to take their art there?

HON. I. VASU.— Mr. Speaker, Sir, on my understanding from the Fiji Arts Council, the Gallery that we have now covers all ethnic groups and they provide assistance to all. But, today I was just briefing on the *iTaukei* side of the arts, but they assist all the ethnic groups in Fiji. If you go there during the display, you can see all the ethnicities, all Fijians are there. If there is a need to do a national art gallery, then we are looking forward to look into it.

MR. SPEAKER.— I thought in your explanation that you have converted the St. Stevens Building, the old Grammar School Hostel, into that particular place, Arts Council now. That is the question that honourable Naupoto raised. We earmarked that when we were organising the

Melanesian Arts Festival some years back. He was very much involved in organising that. We were even looking at the old St. Stevens Building. It is a potential area, but then it was housing the Government ICT. But now, they have converted that into a Gallery.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my supplementary question relates to the protection of our indigenous art and craft and also contemporary art. I know you have mentioned that you will shortly be having negotiations with the Attorney-General Chambers. I am assuming that my question relates to your looking at trademark protection and copyright protection, which is something that has been done by New Zealand, Canada and some other countries really well.

Are you also looking at basically authenticity, because in the world without any borders, there is a particular area where authenticity marks, which may be done through the Ministry of Trade, et cetera, on how they do the Fijian organic products, but will you be looking at authenticity marks also with respect to our art and craft in order to protect our indigenous art and craft?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as for now, as I have stated in my brief, all art and craft that will be going in for trade and branded as Fiji made, has come through the Fiji Arts Council whereby they look at it, make sure the quality and everything is in line. But we are still working with the Office of the Solicitor-General with regard to how we can protect all those areas.

MR. SPEAKER.- It is, perhaps, just a suggestion. It works both ways. You either have the law to safeguard that, or the people who make to ensure it will not end up like a sword from Suvavou being given out to the tourists because that is not genuine. So, what we would like to see is, it is the people that do that themselves. They have an appreciation that what I am doing is genuine. That is the question that was being raised.

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 the Parliament to sit before 4.30 p.m. today to complete the remaining items listed on 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 have Written Questions as indicated there from Questions 85 to 87, Consideration of Bills and of course the Schedule to Motions listed there as one or two relating to the Government Guarantee and FSC and also the Report of the Standing Orders Committee.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion, if any. If not, I call on the Leader of the Government in Parliament to speak in reply, if any.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Thank you, Sir, I do not have any further comments.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

QUESTIONS

Written Questions

Percentage of Budget Utilisation (Question No. 85/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics inform Parliament on the utilisation percentage of the approved 2023-2024 National Budget by April 2024 for:

- (a) each Ministry; and
- (b) each statutory organisation

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, I will table my response at a later sitting date as permitted under SO45(3).

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, the information that the honourable Kumar is asking for is actually that quarterly appropriations reports that come to Parliament and which will have all the information but the question is there. I was not in the Business Committee otherwise I would have opposed that but it is available publicly.

MR. SPEAKER.- We did discuss that but since you are not there, honourable Minister, so we had to bring it to the floor of Parliament.

Indigenous Businesses with Government Awarded Contracts (Question No. 86/2024)

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE 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 the number of indigenous--owned businesses that were awarded Government Contract from 2010 to 2022.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, I have my response in writing, Sir.

Listing of all EFL Grid Extension Projects-2023-2024 (Question No.87/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport provide Parliament a listing of all EFL grid extension projects budgeted for the financial year 2023-2024 to include the following –

- (a) The budget for each project;
- (b) The dates each project was or is scheduled to be completed; and
- (c) The percentage completion of each project.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will table my response at a later date as

permitted under Standing Order 45(3). Sir, I also wish to raise the same issue as the honourable Minister of Finance in terms of the availability of this kind of questioning and answers.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please take note that there will be five Bills for consideration today and I now call on the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection, to move her motion.

CHILD JUSTICE BILL 2024

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the -

- (a) Child Justice Bill 2024 (Bill No. 04/2024), be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must be immediately referred to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights;
- (d) Standing Committee must report on the Bill at the July Sitting of Parliament;
- (e) Upon presenting the Report on the Bill by the Standing Committee, the Bill must be debated, voted upon by Parliament but that one hour be given to debate the Bill with the Right of Reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

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

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I begin my speech, I would love to just acknowledge our students that are here in Parliament who have come especially to be here to be present as I present this Bill.

I wish to acknowledge the students from the Learning Centre, LDS Church College, Gospel High School, Yat Sen School, Multiple Intelligence School, Holy Trinity School, William Cross School, John Wesley School and Kalabu Primary School. I also wish to acknowledge some children's organisations that are here including Vision Fiji as well as the Suva Bahai Community and, of course, I acknowledge our staff that are here, our Permanent Secretary as well as our Director Children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister...

MR. SPEAKER.- And the members of your constituency from Nasinu?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- The children are here Sir, yes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; today we have the chance to make history here in Fiji and, indeed, yet again to lead the entire Pacific region.

I am immensely proud to stand before you today to introduce the Child Justice Bill 2024. This Bill offers us generational change, a law that will catapult us from old ways of thinking, that keep crime rates the same and if children without rights to a new safer Fiji. One way children in conflict with the law do not go on to reoffend but instead go on to become contributing members of society.

At the outset, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to acknowledge the previous government under the leadership of the former Prime Minister, Frank Bainimarama, for having put this proposed law

together in the first place. I acknowledge my predecessors in the Ministry who laid the foundation for this great work which I picked up and it has finally come to this point.

The new Child Justice Bill 2024 finally responds to why children come into contact with the law. The Bill draws on the research and science about what stops the children from offending. This means we now have the chance to pass a law that will keep the community safer because our justice measures will work and over the course of the next few minutes or so, you are going to hear me use the words “science” and “research” a lot. That is because the traditional ways of thinking are not going to get us out of where we are now, because if you always do what you have always done, you will always get what you have always got. It is the research and science that is now loud and clear and how we can stop youth offending at its earliest. Loud and clear on how to stop our children from re-offending.

Research and science tells us, this Bill will work to reduce crime and break cycles of it for generations, but it is also based on logic. If our interventions do not get to the heart of why children offend and instead, we criminalize our children and re-criminalize them, then we are only perpetuating a cycle of re-offending for our children.

Today we know that most often, children who offend have escaped unsafe homes or have no homes at all. There is a deep connection between children who have no care and children who offend. Research from some of our nearest neighbours shows that children who have experienced the psychological damage of child abuse trauma, or who had an intellectual disability make up about 90 percent of our children that are being incarcerated, and that the crimes they commit are largely crimes committed in order to survive or to self-medicate this trauma. It is only logical that we intervene to specifically address these issues and we will drastically reduce crime committed by children thus disrupting the cycle of offending.

Over the past decade Mr. Speaker, Sir, studies conducted have consistently demonstrated that diversion programmes are far more effective than preventing child crime compared to charging or incarcerating a child. Research indicates that with appropriate diversion measures, three-quarters of children do not reoffend within six months, and over half do not engage in further criminal behaviour within two years. Many children have also shared how these interventions have helped them regain control of their lives.

I will tell you a true story that illustrates the science at its most basic. Let me tell you about a young boy we will call Sailosi. Sailosi’s father abused Sailosi and Sailosi’s mother since he was born. Sailosi’s father was unemployed and forced his mum into being a sex worker, so he would have money. In order to escape the domestic violence and sexual slavery, Sailosi’s mother escaped to the streets, taking Sailosi with her, so Sailosi was raised by people on the streets. He was homeless for his entire early childhood. The Department of Social Welfare intervened with Sailosi was three years old and put him in a Children’s Home, but Sailosi’s father came and forced his way into the Home and took Sailosi away.

In his early teens, in his desperation to escape his father’s continuing abuse, Sailosi turned back to the streets where he grew up. It was around this time that his mum died from cancer. This meant that Sailosi had absolutely no one. He was a young child with no one to feed or clothe him. With nothing to eat, no place to sleep and no one to care for him, Sailosi shoplifted food and stole items just to survive. I want you to think about what comes next. Should Sailosi be charged and punished for the consequences of being abused by his father and trying to survive homeless? Should our justice system demonise him for his life of being a child victim? This was one case where diversion was actually used. The Minister at the time ordered Sailosi to be returned to the Children’s Home where he was looked after and received counselling. He is now 14 years old, well settled and

attending secondary school.

This could have been a very, very different story, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but legislative change could mean the same ending for so many children in Sailosi's situation, children who would otherwise go on to live a life of misery and commit crime to survive, instead of changing paths to become a responsible member contributing to our society, just like Sailosi.

This new law would see the Ministry involved as a matter of course in all cases just like this. Never before have we had laws in this country that recognises the life factors that give rise to children coming into conflict with the law and put clear responsibility on a welfare department to intervene and address it, to change the life of that child, thereby, making a safer Fijian society. So, what happens if this Bill does not get passed? Then we are stuck with the current law - the Juveniles Act 1973. Yes, it is over 50 years old and does not respond to the long-established criminological research of the last two decades and evades our international human rights obligations.

This old Act operates on a completely outdated understanding of how and why children come into conflict with the law. It lacks any approach to diversion, like the one we have just heard, and it lacks any approach to restorative justice. Importantly, without any formal provisions on diversion, no one, not even our Ministry has the mandated responsibility to be looking into and resolving the broader circumstances for the child. In fact, the Juveniles Act 1973 adopts an old British approach, which is even now well and truly obsolete in Britain, and globally recognised as an abuse of human rights, but is still in place here in Fiji.

Now, as our practices and approach to child welfare have moved to world-leading with also our proposed Child Care and Protection Bill 2024, which is yet to come, the Juveniles Act 1973 is completely out of step even with our Fijian approach to child protection and care. This Bill was subject to extensive consultation across the Fijian community. It lives up to our unabating relentless commitment to our children. You will not be surprised to hear there is a strong support for this Bill, even from the international community and those who support Fiji so generously. You will not be surprised to hear the support from our children's organisations, even our service providers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were some concerns raised about raising the age of criminal responsibility from 10 years to 14 years, as we are proposing in this Bill. What will happen to our children under 14 years, you might ask? Will they go unpunished to commit more crime?

No, they will not, Mr. Speaker. The Bill explicitly prescribes the intervention, diversion and care that must be taken in relation to these children by our Ministry, so that we see lives change direction, even lives like Sailosi. The Bill does not propose to leave children under the age of 14 years out on the streets to offend again. But it does come from an understanding that we do need to ask questions about these children. Who are these children? Why did they come into conflict with the law in the first place? If we do not that, how can we stop it from happening again? But do not listen to me, listen to the science.

Extensive research across the world clearly shows that the younger a child at their first arrest, the greater their chances of future offending. A study of incarcerated youth found that children arrested before the age of 14 years, are three times more likely to reoffend as adults, compared to children arrested when they are over the age of 14 years.

Therefore, diverting younger children increases the chances greatly that they will not offend again. This means, our community will be safer. It means, precious police resources, precious court resources, precious DPP resources will all be saved. Not only will they now not be dealing with children under 14 years, but there will be less recidivism and less crime over time. But most

importantly, Mr. Speaker, this is our chance to change the lives of our children. It is our chance to stop punishing children, like Sailosi, for living a life they did not choose.

We cannot ignore the medical science. Doctors all over the world have come out in their number to protest holding 10-year-old children criminally responsible, because it is completely against medial consensus regarding brain development. Children under the age of 14 years have not yet developed the social, emotional and intellectual maturity necessary for criminal responsibility. This is why we treat our children differently in other parts of our legal system.

Think about it, Mr. Speaker. If we act like their brains are old enough at 10 years to make fully informed decisions about committing crime, does that not mean we should drop the age for the right to drink alcohol too, and the right to vote to the age of 10? The age of criminal responsibility of 10 years old, out of step with these other legal rights and responsibilities. If we punish children for lives of continual despair, we are not only guilty of a system that willingly abuses their human rights, but we create legacies of intergenerational trauma. Is that what we want for the future of Fiji?

We have the chance here, honourable Members, to disrupt suffering for generations to come. Let us not forget the fact that criminalising children under the age of 14 contravenes our commitments under the Convention on the Rights of a Child. We would all do well to remember that the science and human rights basis for raising the age are so sound, that we are becoming out of step with much of the world. A significant number of countries in Africa have raised the age of criminal responsibility to 14 years, countries like Korea, China, Cambodia, Kuwait, Laos, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Philippines, Timor Leste, and the list goes on and on. These countries have a minimum age criminal responsibility of 14 years.

There are some misplaced ideas that with increasing criminal responsibility to 14 years, children will be used as drug mules; that this will not curb younger children taking drugs. Again, honourable Members, let me bore you with the science because you are about to discover that this Bill is what we need to reduce drug-taking in our children. Young people who have experienced childhood trauma are six times more likely to abuse marijuana and nine times more likely to use hard drugs. The science is clear that these children are looking for any escape from their traumatic memories.

Being charged by Police and then being imprisoned with children who have suffered the same fate will not change that. But proper intervention, care and diversion will. It is the chance to actually get these children off the treadmill of drug abuse and deal with their trauma to stop it happening again. What, of the vulnerability of younger children to be used as drug mules? This Bill is designed to reduce the number of children who need to live a life of crime in order to survive, and therefore be vulnerable to drug trafficking just to survive. In its place, this Bill sees a direct intervention and diversion that will mean these children are no longer 'easy prey'.

Importantly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are deep concerns about the younger age at which children sexually offend. These things is what has driven this legislation which is legislation for change. When children sexually offend against other children, statistics show this is most often precipitated by the fact that they themselves were victims of sexual abuse at a very young age, often at the hands of their own family. Let me be clear, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this does not mean that every victim of child sexual abuse will go on to offend, but amongst children who do sexually offend, this experience is prevalent. Research in our own region shows that if you intervene early enough, you can change the trajectory of offending permanently.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this new Bill gives that opportunity. Our old law or the law in place today, does not. I do not believe that any of us here in this Parliament does not care for children. But think

about the money we throw away in policing, our court system, our DPP, if we continue these processes, it will only see children before the justice system again, and again, and again.

This Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, adopts all the rich, uncontroverted knowledge that will see children in this country thrive, and keep our community safe. Surely, we know too much from the science to persist with outdated, old ways that keep us from progressing. This is our chance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to move our society forward, to activate generational change in an unprecedented way. It is in your hands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, and honourable Members, I commend this Bill to Parliament under Standing Order 51.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to give a short contribution on the Bill that is before Parliament. I thank the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation for the Bill and also acknowledging the previous FijiFirst Government who had done the executive consultation, and we thank you for carrying this Bill forward and tabling it to Parliament.

We all agree to the motion that is before Parliament and that is going through Standing Order 51 but to Committees. In place of the motion, she had specified July to come to Parliament, probably that will be upon your discretion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the July sitting is always prioritised for Budget.

Once the Bill is referred by you to Committees and probably from the honourable Chairman, communication can be made to the office in terms of probably an extension for an August sitting. There is also a ruling by you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that Committees sittings too are to be due by 29th June, 2024. Those are some of the administrative issues that we might face as Committee while we deliberate because it is quite a thick Bill.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the various stakeholders too that we would like to engage, the consultants, the terms of reference, probably from the honourable Attorney-General and the Solicitor-General's Office and the executive consultation report, first brought by the FijiFirst Government in 2021 and 2022. The consultation report would be very thick and the various venues that they have conducting consultations in, that will enable the Committees to put its alternative workplan on the timelines that they will need to work on very strictly before we come back to Parliament.

However, in regard to the content and the substance of the Bill, again, on child justice, we do not have any issues on that. We leave that when we come to deliberation in the Committees and we will bring back a substantive report to Parliament. Without further more to say, we support the motion and the Bill before Parliament and the procedure and the manner that the honourable mover has moved it.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to commend the honourable Minister for bringing this Bill to the floor. I do recall when we were going around the country doing consultation on the Registration of Sex Offenders Bill, that was one of the times where the Committees did realise that children under the age of 18 when they commit those kind of offences, there was a lot of loopholes in the laws and we needed to ensure how we can bring them back to the community, because a minor creating an offence and then getting his whole life disrupted by an offence that was committed during his age when he was not even 18 years was something that was brought forward before the Committee. Though it is under Standing Order 51 but it is going to Committees. It will be scrutinised well and this is something that we will need to protect our children

in this era. Currently, we have the Juveniles Act which is quite old and was due for review. So, I would like to commend the honourable Minister for bringing this Bill and sending it to Committees.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the honourable Members for their contribution to the debate. Certainly, in terms of when it will return to Parliament, that is something for Parliament to consider, we are certainly open to August. Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe that was the timeframe too for the Anti-Doping Bill that is going to Committees so it is certainly open to that.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to thank you all and I thank all our children and parents who are here to be present for this historic Bill being tabled in Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[Child Justice Bill 2024 (Bill No. 04/2024) committed to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights and to report back in the August sitting of Parliament]

MR. SPEAKER.- I intend to adjourn Parliament now for afternoon tea. We will resume when the bell is sounded.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.46 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 5.24 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now call on the Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection, to move her second motion.

CHILD CARE AND PROTECTION BILL 2024

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the -

- (a) Child Care and Protection Bill 2024 (Bill No. 05/2024), be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must be immediately referred to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights;
- (d) Standing Committee must report on the Bill at a sitting of Parliament in August; and
- (e) Upon presentation of the report on the Bill by the Standing Committee, the Bill must be debated and voted by Parliament, but that one hour be given to debate the Bill with the Right of Reply given me as the Member moving this motion.

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

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament, today has been almost 12 years in the making. It is my privilege to introduce to Parliament a life changing Bill for the wellbeing of Fijian families today and for generations to come. I acknowledge the political will of the previous Government to bring this law. I thank the former Prime Minister, as well as my predecessors, including the late honourable Jiko Luveni, for the hard work that was rendered to this historic Bill to finally make its way to Parliament today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Child Care and Protection Bill 2024 has waited years for us to reach this point in our human rights evolution. It embodies our commitment to the protection of our children under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a Convention that Fiji signed in 1993.

This Bill commits us to protecting and supporting all Fijian children, but especially those deprived of parental care and those who cannot remain with their families because of abuse or neglect. It is a vital plan in our Government's overall mission and strategy to free the children of this country from abuse and neglect and addressing why people perpetrate abuse in the first place.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this point, I look forward to sharing our plans in terms of bringing a national plan of action to eliminate violence against children in the months to come. But right now, this Bill heralds a new beginning for our children and for generations of Fijian families to come.

Why is this Bill so important? There is one statistic that encapsulates its importance. Five out of every six children in Fiji face some form of abuse or neglect by their families. It is difficult to read that statistic aloud. The thought of being one of those children, Mr. Speaker, is truly unimaginable. But this shocking statistic illustrates the extent of child abuse and neglect in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, every one of these children carries a story of lasting hurt and trauma that will impact their adult lives. If we do not act urgently, we risk a deeply traumatized generation where cycles of abuse will continue across their offspring and their offspring's offspring.

If this statistic is not a call to action for our nation, then I do not know what is, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Children are precious gifts from God. It is our duty as a people and Members of Parliament to protect and support them to thrive, especially our most vulnerable children. Ultimately, it is our children who will take this country forward after we are long gone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill represents the Government's response to that call to action. Therefore, we refer this Bill to be moved under Standing Order 51, not just because of our commitments under the Human Rights Convention, but because we want to bring to life children's rights, their development and their wellbeing. We want to give all of our Fiji's children the best future they can possibly imagine.

This Bill is so urgently needed because our current system of child protection, Mr. Speaker, is based on an outdated philosophy of rescue and removal developed over 50 years ago. In that time, the world and knowledge about what works to recover children and families has changed drastically. We know this approach has become more and more outdated because it ignores the importance of children's holistic development within their own families and communities. Indeed, it ignores the harm of depriving a child of their broader families' nurture and the importance of their community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the United Nation's Committee that monitors the Child Rights Convention has pointed out that the number of residential homes and children coming into residential care in Fiji just keeps increasing over the years. Most children find themselves in residential care because they have been neglected or abused by families. These children spend very long periods of time in residential care with no love of family or their community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot let this continue. That is why the Child Care and Protection Bill prioritises family preservation and family-based forms of care. It explicitly acknowledges and reinforces the key role of parents, families and communities in raising children and protecting them from harm. It also clearly presents the distinction between children in need of care and protection and children in conflict with the law.

Importantly, under the current child protection laws, the Government can only intervene once a child has been abused, and we know this is far too late. Success only comes when you can prevent or intervene early. This new Bill encompasses prevention, early intervention and response services.

Options for voluntary care plans can be negotiated with the child's parents where court orders are used as a last resort when agreements cannot be reached. The child, the parents, the extended family, traditional community leaders, can be actively involved with care planning. Priority is given to kinship and family-based care. Prevention and early intervention has to be the new talk that we walk. That will be the key to breaking cycles of abuse that are afflicted upon 83 percent of our children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, without this new law, we will continue to have a child protection system that, at its best, can only be the proverbial ambulance at the bottom of the cliff. The ambulance will continue to desperately try and reach as many children once they have already been abused, but have no ability to intervene with the family, stopping this from occurring.

We need to get up there on the cliff, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and stop the abuse and neglect from being perpetuated by families against children. We need to support communities to prevent violence in their families and to be the broad network of support for a child's recovery from trauma.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, and honourable Members, some may think that this Bill is only about children but let me assure you that this Bill does not serve the human rights of Children alone. The

world's largest study on childhood adversity shows that adults who experience abuse, neglect and trauma as children, were far more likely to suffer long-term intellectual, behavioral and physical, and mental health problems.

This Bill is about the health of our entire society and our nation. This Bills put us well on the way to improving the physical and mental health of generations of Fijians to come. But this is not all that the Bill ultimately achieves for Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir. If we support our families and communities to stop abusing and neglecting children, we will also see a safer Fiji.

Child abuse and neglect does untold damage to a child and their development. The psychological harm, the lack of love and the lack of a home leave many children vulnerable to conflict with the criminal justice system, and this continues well into adulthood. That is why, Mr. Speaker, this very Bill will set the foundations for the changes our country so desperately needs when it comes to children in conflict with the law. It will set the platform to realise the aspirations of the Child Justice Bill 2024, should it be passed. But it should also ultimately reduce the number of adults in conflict with the law, many of whom have experienced such backgrounds as the context to their own offending.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are looking to make seismic change here, and this will require investment in our child protection workforce. This is why the Child Care and Protection Bill 2024 provides for the upgrading of the Child Protection Services under the Department of the Social Welfare to a Department of Children with its own Director of Children, Assistant Director of Children and a complement of specialised Child Welfare Officers at the national and divisional level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are confident that this Bill will respond to the long overdue call for change to reduce horrific levels of child abuse and neglect that are carried on in our community, and to truly ensure the children are treated like precious gifts from God. To make sure we got it right, we conducted extensive consultation on the Bill. These consultations engaged community members, the justice community, faith-based community, child rights organisations, CSOs and other Fijian Government agencies. We received wide support from the Bill, especially from our civil society organisations.

We also know, Mr. Speaker, that this Bill sits at the forefront of child protection lawmaking around the world. It is based on research about what works for children and families. It finally moves us away from our outdated child protection laws to one that will be a shining light for the whole Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Gandhi once said, "The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members." Children are chief among our most vulnerable and are most treasured. This Bill changes the bar on how we shall be measured. I commend this Bill before Parliament under Standing Order 51, and I strongly urge honourable Members to support it.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise again to give a short contribution from this side of Parliament. Again, I thank the honourable Minister for tabling the Bill, and I also thank her for acknowledging the FijiFirst Government that had initially worked on this Bill and her predecessor. I think that is the way forward. We have nothing to say in the substance of the Bill, given the Bill will be referred to the Standing Committee for Justice, Law and Human Rights and we will have proper deliberations when it comes to the hearing of public submission, moving around holding discussions with the stakeholders and consultants and the terms of reference, plus sitting with the consultants and the drafters from the Office of the Solicitor-General.

With that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we probably might come up with some proposed amendments but that is too premature now for us to comment on. Again, I thank the honourable Minister for suggesting that in the premise of the motion, that we come back to Parliament in the August sitting. I hope that Parliament through you, Sir, with the Secretariat will facilitate that, given that we have Budget in July and also the Committees needs to sit and bring these two Bills. They are both quite thick Bills, the one moved earlier and this one. I think the Committees, we have a very short time to bring this and I hope that the cooperation from the Secretariat and the request from the Committees will be taken on board.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is just upon me to thank all honourable Members of this Parliament for their indication that they support what is before Parliament and that it does go under Standing Order 51 to the Committees, and I wish the Committee all the very best in their deliberations. This has been consulted quite extensively and it has been 12 years, so hopefully they do not take 12 years more. I know they have a few months before them, and some very hard-working Members are in that Committee. We all look forward to the Report when we come back to Parliament.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[Child Care and Protection Bill 2024 (Bill No. 05/2024) committed to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights and to report back in the August sitting of Parliament]

NATURAL DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT (AMENDMENT) BILL 2024

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the -

- (a) Natural Disaster Risk Management (Amendment) Bill 2024 (Bill No. 06/2024), be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must be immediately referred to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights;
- (d) Standing Committee must report on the Bill in the July or August sitting of Parliament and upon presentation of the Report on the Bill by the Standing Committee; and
- (e) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament but that one hour be given to debate the Bill, with the Right of Reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

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

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament, I rise before this august Parliament today to move that the Natural Disaster Risk Management (Amendment) Bill 2024 be moved under Standing Order 51 with the referral to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as Members of this august Parliament would know, the review of the Natural Disaster Management Act 1998 began under the leadership of the current Leader of the Opposition, who was then the Minister for Disaster Management. The review is a culmination of over a decade

long review process, marked by extensive consultations and incorporation of lessons learnt from past disasters, including the recent COVID-19 pandemic which has resulted in the Bill that is before you today.

This process aims to streamline the time spent deliberating on the Bill, while ensuring its integrity and transparency, and it is essential that we balance the democratic process by allowing thorough examination of the Bill, while also emphasising the urgency of its endorsement. This legislation provides a crucial legal framework needed to protect our people from the devastating impacts of disasters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the prime reason for the urgency required in tabling the Natural Disaster Risk Management (Amendment) Bill 2024 through Standing 51 is because of the unpredictability of hazards that we are now facing and the unprecedented damage and losses that they incur on our economy and society in general. One clear indication is of the recent flooding in the Serua area last week.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic that swept through the country in 2019 and the back-to-back cyclones of *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana* in 2021, has put pressure on to our already fragile environment. Mr. Speaker, Sir, these were extraordinary in terms of their nature and frequency and stretched our disaster management capabilities to the limit. There have been gaps identified in inter-agency coordination and responsibilities that needed to be urgently addressed to enable effective and efficient disaster risk management and the timely saving of lives and livelihoods.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have done the necessary consultations amongst Government agencies. The Bill refines our disaster risk management governance arrangements, to ensure that there is clarity and efficiency in the way we respond to the new hazards and disasters we are now facing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bill is completely contextualised to Fiji's unique needs, while at the same time aligns Fiji to international standards and best practices, as outlined in global and regional disaster risk reduction frameworks.

The Bill is a product of constant consultations and lessons learnt from disasters and, of course, the good work done by my predecessor, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, during his tenure as Minister responsible for disaster management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is our conceited opinion and as responsible stewards for the safety and security of our people, we must treat this Bill as a matter of utmost priority. The changing weather and hazards we are now facing due to the impacts of climate change means that we cannot rely on our past experience and lull ourselves into a false sense of security.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the prompt enactment of the Bill ensures that all necessary protocols, funding and organisational structures are in place, to effectively manage and mitigate disaster risks, potentially saving lives and reducing damage before the start of the new cyclone season.

There are several critical initiatives aimed at enhancing humanitarian coordination that needs to be in place before the cyclone season starts, such as the humanitarian actors registry that will control and streamline humanitarian action in the country, as well as the establishment of the disaster volunteer scheme that will ensure the protection of disaster volunteers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bill is one of Government's policy reform actions of the joint budget support operation with multiple development partners, together with a contingent to a funding

package of over \$500 million. And by expanding the Bill under Standing Order 51 with referral to the Standing Committee, will surely demonstrate our collective commitment to protecting foreign and domestic investments in the country by reassuring investors and stakeholders of the country's resilience and stability, thereby, maintaining economic confidence and preventing potential financial losses.

For these reasons, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I recommend that this Bill be referred to the Standing Committee for Justice, Law and Human Rights, with the Committee to revert to Parliament in the July or August sitting. I strongly urge honourable Members to support the motion that is before this August Parliament.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a quick word on the Bill that is before Parliament, I think everyone knows that this Bill was born out of *TC Winston*, one of the worst disasters that we have ever had in this country, and we understand the urgency with which it needs to be dealt with, bearing in mind that we are susceptible to so much in terms of climate change and all that happens around the country, and it has taken a bit of time to get to Parliament.

I want to take this opportunity, Sir, to speak for and on behalf of the Committee. We welcome all the work but because of what we had mentioned earlier, Sir, our schedule would mean that we may not be able to bring it back in the July session. Hopefully, the mover of the motion will agree that it comes in the session afterwards - in August or September.

The Bill is quite comprehensive, it will probably not require as much consultation, as I think a lot of work has been done but it certainly will require a little bit of scrutiny and we have it on good words from our Chairman, that we will do our absolute utmost with your help, Sir, to ensure that we actually get it done before August. It is very timely that we actually get this done as quickly as possible. For a nation like ours, it is very important that we get this done because it guides us in terms of NDMO and I am also under the gun because he is the former Minister, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you. I have been given to understand that the honourable Minister has also, kind of, added something herewith a backslash August. Am I right, honourable Minister?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, I will leave that in your good hands for your decision.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, so it is August.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank everyone for all the hard work that has been done and I have no further comments to add.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[Natural Disaster Risk Management (Amendment) Bill 2024 (Bill No. 06/2024 committed to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights and report back in the August sitting of Parliament]

HON. F.S. KOYA.- A Point of Order, Sir, just a quick clarification, unfortunately the printers have missed pages 58 and 59 in all the Bills, just so that the Secretary-General can be aware and get us the copies as quickly as possible. I think that applies to everyone.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, we are going to organise that. Thank you for notifying us, honourable Koya. The honourable Minister has given that to us, it is just a printing error.

Honourable Members, the next two Bills are for debate and enactment. I also remind honourable Members that pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Monday, 20th May, 2024 and on Tuesday, 21st May, 2024 that the debate on each of the two Bills will be limited to one hour only. I hope I am very, very clear on that; two bills - one hour only. This is nothing new, especially those sitting on this side.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Bring it on!

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, I like that.

CORRECTIONS SERVICE (AMENDMENT) BILL 2024

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Monday, 20th May, 2024, I move that:

The Corrections Service (Amendment) Bill 2024 (Bill No. 02/2024) be debated, voted upon and be passed.

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

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- My apology, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- I am beginning to worry, are we coming or going.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the newly appointed Commissioner for Corrections Service, Dr. Jalesi Nakarawa. Dr. Nakarawa is also from the beautiful island of Kadavu, is a former Corrections Officer and held the position of Assistant Commissioner before he migrated to New Zealand. He is one of the first group of officers to graduate from USP while still working as a Corrections Officer in Naboro. He graduated with a PhD in Law from Waikato University, returned to Fiji and served as an Assistant Professor at the Fiji National University.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I will be brief. Most of the issues that are being canvassed here have already been canvassed on Monday. I rise to contribute to the debate of the Corrections Service (Amendment) Bill 2024 which was tabled on Monday, 20th May, 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many changes have occurred over the years with the operations and administration of the Fiji Corrections Service. The Bill simply amends the Corrections Service Act 2006 to improve the Administration of the Corrections Service while plans to conduct a holistic review of the Act are underway. It is important to amend the Act to extend the list of international standards to include the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners namely the Nelson Mandela Rules, the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and the Non-custodian Measures for women offenders which is the Bangkok Rules and to ensure the

and the Non-Custodian Measures for women offenders which is the Bangkok Rules and to ensure the well-being of the prisoners who are under the care of the Corrections Service.

It is also worth mentioning that the practice in the past years, that had Medical Officers and Registered Nurses are appointed by the Commissioner of the Corrections Service, thus amendment to that is necessary to reflect the same. One of the core roles of the medical staff is to conduct medical checks for all newly admitted inmates. This is to ensure that newly admitted inmates are not suffering from any illnesses and that they have not sustained any injuries prior to their admission. This allows the medical staff to address the medical needs of newly admitted inmates. Medical check-ups are also conducted for those who are about to be released under any of the early release schemes as well as for those who are being released for full discharge.

The Allocation and Classification Board is already in place. The practice is that the Supervisor of the Division closest to Headquarters sits on the Board to ensure that there are no delays in the work of the Board due to the geographical location of the centres. That addresses the issue raised by the honourable Bulitavu why the Supervisor in the Northern and Western Divisions do not sit in the Classification Board. While the Bill amends to align the current practices, there will be room to create new policies after the holistic review of the Act is complete and the appointment of the new Commissioner is just at the right time. There has been consultation with the team from the Fiji Corrections Service and with the Office of the Solicitor-General.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will not go into the clauses of the Bill as I had touched on it on Monday, I hope that my colleagues on the other side, they did it in the last session where they spoke highly of the changes that are needed in the Fiji Corrections Service. It is only the right thing to support the Bill.

MR. SPEAKER. - Honourable Members, before I offer the floor, I have a list given by the honourable Whips, as follows:

1. Hon. M.D. Bulitavu;
2. Hon. Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources;
3. Hon. Ioane Naivalurua; and
4. Hon. Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be brief. This side of Parliament fully supports the Bill that is before Parliament because it will include a few necessary amendments, that is, the Mandela Rules, Bangkok Rules and also the Tokyo Rules in terms of non-custodial sentences. For the Bangkok Rules, especially for the treatment of women prisoners because we have heard incidents in the past where women have been locked up with men in some of our receiving centers, especially the ones in Labasa and there are some incidences that happened in the past.

In terms of the Nelson Mandela Rules which is also on the treatment and the humane treatment of prisoners. Moving forward, we have got a special clause (clause 6) in terms of where officers who do not report back or to notify their senior officers for seven days, they are deemed to have resigned. There are many cases of Absent Without Official Leave (AWOL) regarding prison officers, given the lack of pay plus hoping that a job evaluation exercise comes in faster to prevent all those AWOLS and all those welfare for Corrections Officers.

Moving forward, in clause 9 in terms of medical examination, I think this is a timely intervention through this particular legislation, given all prisoners will now go through medical check-ups once they are brought in at the Corrections Centre. This medical check-ups will help

determine what kind of meal classes they have, whether it is “c” scale, “d” scale or “s” scale meals that they have given the medical conditions that they have.

In addition, on the central allocation and classification board, there is also time being given. In the current practice was through the Commissioner’s orders, honourable Naivaluarua might like to talk about that, they have a big list of composition officers who are part of that but this has been streamlined and will help in the classification of prisoners and allocating them in suitable prisons because they are located in Suva, the West and in Labasa. They will only receive prisoners once all the records come to this particular Board and they will then classify them through the crimes that they have committed. Those who have committed rape or sexual offences will be held in a separate prison away from the others who have offended other offences.

Clause 15, in terms of having a psychological report, it is timely given the long process that is there for those prisoners who have come through special stage, when they want to apply for community work and also placement for paid employment. This will actually quicken the the rehabilitation process that is currently there.

Introduction of psychologists, to determine whether a particular prisoner is fit and healthy to do further education and also to work outside, that is timing and also welcomed.

The other thing honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Corrections is the inclusion of the Parole Board, probably you can look into the remittance of our convicts that are held in the various centres. That is all Sir, this side of Parliament supports the Bill that is before Parliament.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to stand in support of the Bill that has been explained this afternoon to us by the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Justice. I think we all understand, Sir, that part of our consideration here in this Parliament, we make laws, we change them, we amend and repeal is that once we identify that there are some regime of laws that need some changes, when we effect change, we ensure that the language of that amendment that we bring in is simple, and is readable and understandable by the general public.

Part of it also I think is when we look at this Bill, it is seeking to ensure that there is alignment and correct alignment of terminology and references which explains part of the cosmetic changes that this Bill seeks to introduce but more importantly, I think which is found in the beginning of the Bill is that it is seeking to be constitutionally compliant which brings me to the point where the honourable Bilitavu had spoken about the three rules which we are seeking in this Bill to bring into the framework of the Prisons law - the Mandela Rules, the Tokyo Rules as well as the Bangkok Rules. These are all conventions that seek to establish minimum standards of how prison and prison’s administration are supposed to be administered while also at the same time ensuring both the safety of those that are administering the prison system as well as those who are in the prison system, the prisoners themselves.

In relation to the Bangkok Rules, one of the things that we probably would want to highlight is that, what I would mean is the adoption of the 70 rules that relates to the safe management of women prisoners. This is something that I think is worthwhile in reading up on the text because it would provide the necessary framework, that would allow all of us to see that women prisoners would go into prison and serve their time, the offenders would come back and get rehabilitated back into society. The last rule, of course, is ensuring that there are minimum standards that are observed for non-custodial prisoners, and I think this is important because when we are looking at that aspect Mr. Speaker, Sir.

One of the things that we realise in our history and not just here, I think it applies everywhere else in the Commonwealth is that there is always a high degree and a high rate of recidivism. People who go to prison, they do not get rehabilitated properly, they come back into society, they find the environment quite new, very enticing to commit any other forms of crimes, they commit it, they go back to prison and in 10 years you find a rap sheet of people who have many many offendingsthroughout their lives.

I think when we look at rehabilitation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the key things that rehabilitation programmes in our corrections and prison service is supposed to is to ensure that, that prisoner does not go back to prison ever again. So, these special measures, these minimum standards, I think when they are brought into the framework of our prison's department is going to help the prisons officers and those who administer deal with high recidivism and ensure that they no longer become part of those statistics.

So, the Bill that is presently before the Parliament this afternoon seeks exactly to do that, observe the constitutional requirement for compliance and at the same time home-in on those rules where we can operationalise or the prisons department can operationalise the requirements of those rules so that we can have very good rehabilitation system, that can allow for prisoners to come into prison, serve their time and come back a changed man or woman.

I stand in this Parliament this afternoon, Mr. Speaker, Sir, again thanking the honourable Bulitavu for coming in support of the Bill and I am sure that the honourable Naivalurua, who is a former Commissioner of Prisons would also see the good that this Bill will bring into Parliament and ultimately be part of our laws in Fiji. I am in support of the Bill, Mr. Speaker.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Corrections Service is one of those closely scrutinized and monitored organisations as it should be because of the nature of the work. But, before I continue, I join the honourable Attorney-General in congratulating the new Commissioner of Corrections, Dr. Jalesi Nakarawa, and if I may wish to add on to his profile, he is also someone from up Flagstaff - ex-Marist. I just wanted to place that on record, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Also, I thank the officers - men and women, who have toiled hard at the front line, I am referring to their work as work in the frontline. It is not only stressful, quite demanding and sometimes demoralising on some situations. I also at this juncture wish to convey my appreciation to the Acting Commissioner, Salote Panapasa, for holding on to the fort before the appointment of the new Commissioner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2006, the principal Act was enacted, and it has taken the Corrections 18 years to where we are today. It has transformed the organisation into a better organisation, a more effective, more efficient and an organisation that now fully understands its primary function and role. I had the blessings to be there in the time it was enacted, and I can look back with pride in what this Act has done.

Like any other Act for that matter, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the situation changes, the environment changes, it needs to be reviewed, adjusted and amended, so therefore, the 18 clauses that has been presented by the honourable Attorney-General, I have examined and scrutinised it in line with the Act and I believe, it is a good amendment, a good change that will improve the operation of the organisation not only in terms of its focus but above all, its ability to deliver back to society, a product that is those that had been incarcerated in corrections to be a better person, to re-join their families and loved ones.

That is important aspect, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of the role and function of a Corrections service. The ability to care, look after, treat and handover again to society a better person. That in essence is the role and function of the Corrections Service. As I examined the clauses that needs to be changed, I commend the honourable Attorney-General and his team, especially in the area of allocation and the classification. This is an important aspect of corrections. They need to be what I call “carefully and correctly diagnosed” simply meaning that we need to find out the reasons why they are there.

Some of them are deeply rooted and some of them are very difficult to understand why they are there when we find out what has caused them to commit that particular offence, then we are challenged with the ability of finding out the right treatment for this offender. Then we are able to allocate them for the place where they can be cared for whether it is in the maximum, the medium, minimum and so forth. This is a very important part of the work of the hierarchy in Corrections.

I wish to highlight that this is a good part of the amendment that has been done by the review team. I also commend the work which has always been a big administrative headache for leadership in Corrections. Those that disappear and we never see them again and is now included here in this particular Act, so thank you.

The other one that I wanted to mention too, is the focus on the health care of inmates which is outlined in section 26, clearly articulated that everyone needs to be medically examined as you come in or also when you leave.

I thank the work that has been done, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a great work. It is timely and I think with this amendment here, it will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the organisation to be a robust, focussed organisation that can deliver service back to the community. Looking forward, I would ask, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that on the second review, we go beyond Standing Order 51 and we fully scrutinize the next review of this particular Act. I fully support the amendment to the Act.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not want to hold us any longer than we need to. First of all, may I thank the outgoing Acting Commissioner Ms. Panapasa for the work that she has done all this while and also congratulate the new Commissioner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Members who had spoken before me including the honourable Attorney-General the former Magistrate, former Commissioner of Corrections, honourable Mosese Bulitavu both as Counsel and also college graduate and also honourable Vosarogo are more qualified than I who only for a very short-time was a Permanent Secretary for Justice during the time when the honourable Naivalurua was the Commissioner for Corrections.

In a small way, I had a very small contribution to what is being proposed in Parliament today. They said almost everything that needs to be said about supporting this Bill and I support this Bill strongly. My argument for it is this Bill makes the inmates more human in that sense. For those of us that may never been inside either as inmate or Corrections Officer, perhaps fail to understand exactly the space that has often been referred to in a very negative fashion by members of society, so it is the outcasts of society that go there. It is always a challenge to try and create an environment that makes them or gives them the freedom to become more human than less the freedom, to enjoy the freedom at least to a certain degree than they would be enjoying inside.

So many of the proposals here especially the mentions of the different Conventions, the Constitution in terms of their rights. These are important for us as Members of Parliament, not only us, but the members of our community to reflect on this and especially when the outcome, ...

most of the Members here have spoken about, the important part is when they come out. What they make of their life when they come out?

This Bill, I think in a special way helps them to make them better people and makes them productive members of society when they come out. I think there are many, many successful stories that attest to that. So, in that regard, I support essentially the proposal of this Bill as has been already moved in Parliament and also the sentiments that have been spoken by the Members who have spoken before me. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for this opportunity and I support the Bill.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to thank each and every Member who have spoken. It is a good demonstration when the people of Fiji see that Members of Parliament really do care about members of the society, vulnerable, who sometimes not of their own choice but for circumstances do end up in prison that they are still cared for. This is one of the milestone achievements of the Acting Commissioner, Ms. Panapasa. There was a handing over ceremony yesterday, I salute her and the direction was given to complete this project and with the incoming new Commissioner, we hope to have a holistic review of the Fiji Corrections Service.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[A Bill for an Act to amend the Corrections Service Act 2006 (Bill No. 02/2024 enacted by the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji. (Act No..... of 2024)]

METEOROLOGICAL AND HYDROLOGICAL SERVICES BILL 2024

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Tuesday 21st May, 2024 , I move:

That the Meteorological and Hydrological Services Bill (Bill No. 03/2024) be debated, voted upon and passed.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Just before you do so, Sir, first of all I would like to apologise for something that I mentioned that was highlighted by honourable Bala - it is one hour for each Bill. I said what was written on my script here, that is, one hour for the two Bills. That has now been corrected, one hour for one Bill.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Leader of Opposition and esteemed Members of Parliament, I rise today to share my views and clarify the details of the Meteorological and Hydrological Services Bill 2024 that is before this august Parliament that was introduced on Tuesday.

This is a significant milestone in Fiji's Government Framework. It marks the first ever attempt to create a comprehensive governing framework, to guide and empower the Department of Meteorological and Hydrological Services in the provision of its services. It is designed not only to regulate the provision of weather forecast, meteorological and hydrological services within Fiji but also to recognise and extend its influence and expertise throughout the region.

The objectives of the Bill as already mentioned are multifaceted, recognise and empower the Fiji Meteorological and Hydrological Services, empowers the Director of Meteorological Services to carry out his or her duties in the most effective manner in the practical provisions of weather forecast and recognise the many other services which are essential for the critical functions of Fiji's Meteorological and Hydrological Services.

The proposed Bill also provides the effective and efficient provision of Meteorological and Hydrological Services that contribute to a sustainable economic development, protection of life, and of course in the protection of hydrological property from meteorological and hydrological disasters which is a common occurrence in our region. Sir, it also encompasses the important contribution of the Fiji Meteorological Services towards the Nadi flight information region, as already mentioned especially with the Pacific region. It provides broadcast throughout the region.

The Bill also recognises the Fiji Meteorological and Hydrological Services leading role in the region by providing weather forecast and warnings to smaller island neighbouring countries such as Tuvalu, Niue, Kiribati, Cook Islands, Tokelau and Nauru, to name a few.

I had mentioned the possibilities of public private engagement in the delivery of the services. This is an important element moving forward and it did encompass interaction and collaboration between entities from the public, private and business sector, as well as academia and civil society in the production and delivery of weather, climate hydrological marine and related environmental data, information and services which could be extended to those. Some examples of public/private engagements are as follows:

1. Private companies installing meteorological observing instruments in high rise buildings and exchanging meteorological data with the Meteorological Office.
2. Vessels being fitted with barometers, anemometers and meteorological data are then transmitted to the Meteorological Office at regular intervals.
3. Collaboration between research institutions and meteorological and hydrological services where meteorological data is supplied to research institutions who, in turn, analyse data, determine trends and publish scientific journals, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Reports, et cetera.

Sir, the proposed Bill also enables the issuance of impact days forecast which contributes to the broader Fiji Multi-Hazard Early Warning Systems which also strengthens the linkages between Fiji Meteorological and Hydrological Services and the Natural Disaster Management Office.

I have already stated that the regional specialised Meteorological Centre is one of the only six centres globally and this Bill assists in strengthening that. Its functions include the naming of tropical cyclones and related alerts and warnings.

Sir, following the devastating flood of 2012 and recommendations of recognised international organizations, Cabinet had agreed that the sole mandated for issuing flood forecasting Fiji be moved from the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Water Authority of Fiji to be vested with the Fiji Meteorological Services. As a Coalition Government, we continue from that and to put through the legislation and regulations and, of course, to operationalise.

Sir, the proposed Bill tends to mirror similar Acts that have been passed, for example, in Australia, Vanuatu, Seychelles and Tonga, to name a few.

The Clauses of the Bill, we have already distributed that, so I will not go through each one but basically provide for the definitions, objectives and functions, and also what the services are

empowered to do. It also includes technical audit functions and what the Bill empowers individuals such as the Ministers, in terms of making regulations.

One of the key elements in terms of not only the Meteorological Services but the scientific technical areas in the Ministry is the high turnover and this is something we are very concerned about. Since my short time there, there have been two or three acting directors and they have been recruited by regional organisations.

We cannot compete with them, but there is room within this Bill, that maybe we could have some sort of MOU with them in terms of the message we could take to prevent that, or to have some sort of secondment from the Fiji Government to these regional organisations in order that we can manage some of the issues such as high turnover of very technical and experienced professional staff. Thank you, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion and similar to the ones that we have gone over, I also have a list given by the Whips, and the batting will be as follows, the:

1. Hon. J. Usamate;
2. Hon. Attorney-General and Minister for Justice;
3. Hon. Leader of the Opposition; and
4. Hon. Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Minister, again, and I thank you, Sir, for giving me the floor to speak on this Bill. As has been mentioned previously, the Bill has been a long time coming. There had been a prior Bill in 2016 and then the Bill was rejuvenated, again, in 2018-2019 to get it going. Sir, I am really glad to see that it has finally come to Parliament after such a long time.

The honourable Minister had talked about the history of weather forecasting and collecting meteorological information in Fiji, starting in the late 1800s, then we had the New Zealand Air Force, then the South Pacific Air Traffic Council that took place, and over the years, the Fiji Meteorological and Hydrological Services has continued to grow, but the fact that we now have this legislation, as the honourable Minister has pointed out, empowers the Director. It gives power to the Director to be able to carry out their roles in the best possible way. So, they will now have this legislative basis on which to build the operation into the future.

As he has pointed out, our Fiji Meteorological Services has quite a good reputation. It is, in fact, responsible for the Flight Information Centre in Nadi and also has been recognised as the regional specialised meteorological centre. So, it has global recognition in terms of what it does and it has a special status with the World Meteorological Organization.

In this particular Bill, we are combining both of these two special arms in which we need good forecasting and good information, - meteorological and hydrological, because we all know that the biggest disasters in Fiji are not, all the time, cyclones. It is flooding - flooding is the big one because even if you do not have a cyclone, if the cyclone does not pass through Fiji, flooding will happen, so flooding is very, very critical for us. Anything around flooding is very important for anything that we do.

Looking through the Bill itself, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I see that now, for this Act, there will be no longer be a Fiji Meteorological Services, but will now become a Fiji Meteorological and Hydrological Services, managed by a Director.

Just looking through some of the parts on Clause 5, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the functions of the Service, I think they are all very good. There is just one issue that I wanted to highlight here, which I think the honourable Minister and the Director Meteorological Services would have been engaged with and, that is, Clause 5(1)(m) that states, and I quote:

“arrange with any ministry, department, public agency, office or person to take and record meteorological observations or to record hydrological data and transmit...”

I think this is very important – the ‘transmit’ bit.

If you go around, you have the automatic weather stations, you have the hydrological meters in the rivers, but sometimes they are not transmitting. I think that is something that we need to make sure because if the data is there, the data is being captured but it is not being sent to the place where it is analysed, observed and interpreted, then there is a breakdown in the system. Sometimes in the past, we were to resort to manual people to actually go there and to try to get the readings. I think that is one part that struck me in my time as the Minister.

The other part is this, we have very good modelling systems but sometimes, I do not think the modelling systems do not take into account the moisture content in the soil. They look at the amount of precipitation and rainfall, but nothing seems to measure the amount of moisture content in the soil because if there is a lot of moisture content in the soil, then the flooding will happen very quickly. So, I am hopeful that as they develop their models into the future, they will be able to take up ways to try to address these important issues that will even then fine tune further the very, very good work that has been done by the Fiji Meteorological Services.

As the honourable Minister has pointed out, we lose a lot of these people – very good assets. There is a very short band of latitude in the world where people earn the skills to learn about tropical cyclones. We are smacked in the middle of that Centre – of that place where people learn their skills to predict and forecast tropical cyclones because they happen, it is just this brief brand of area around the equator. So, our people who come through the Centre and the training that they do, they get good jobs everywhere. We have lost them to a lot of places, so I think this is going to be a challenge for us going into the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, going to Clause 5(2), we noticed there, and it reads:

“The service may provide commercial meteorological and hydrological services for remuneration.”

I think this is also good because being able to provide something for a fee of service, will also enhance the reputation of the Centre and it also forces them to enhance their own abilities so that they can deliver the kind of information that people are willing to pay for.

In the future, as the honourable Minister has pointed out, they will be looking maybe at some time in the future, the Meteorological Services or Hydrological Service might be hived off as an entity on its own. I think that is good - overall, in the development of Government, we always want to see Government produce.

Government maintains the policy, the regulatory bit, but the actual operations go out, and that is what has already happened in the Ministry of Public Works and Meteorological Services and Transport, Water Authority of Fiji has gone, Fiji Roads Authority has gone, the policy is maintained but this has gone out. So, I think over the long-term, that is a good development. Ultimately, it might take a few more years, a lot of work might still need to be done, before we can get to that.

There is one sticky bit that we might have with the Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is around Clause 7(1) and (2). Clause 7(1) says, and I quote:

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

I understand why this was put in the first place because under the World Meteorological Organization in Nadi is recognised as the place where this forecasting is done. They have been given the right to be the first level where they provide the basic information on predicting cyclones and forecasting.

At the moment also, we have a lot to agencies that do that. We all know about *Na Draki*, so I think this needs to be grappled with, because we have the freedom of information issue. How do we grapple with that? Clause 7(1) says that when someone does it, issues or authorizes the issuance of a weather warning or alert, it is an offence and is liable on conviction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will give you one scenario. In the Ba Market which has a lot of flooding, sometimes the vendors will call the Ba Market Master and say, ‘there is going to be flood’. They are giving a weather warning. Will they then be liable for conviction, when that warning has not been authorised by the Director? This is a far-fetched thing, but it can happen.

So, the wording of what it actually means. What does a weather warning or alert mean? Does it mean someone saying something like that because when market vendors do that, they know that it is something that is very important for them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Clause 10 - Indemnification from liability - maybe honourable Attorney-General, that should be referring to ‘exclusion of liability’. The way that it is worded now, because at the end of that sentence at the bottom, it says, “unless it is shown that the person did not act in good faith or with reasonable care”. So, I suggest maybe that, that might be considered.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for your indulgence.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I had indicated yesterday, it is a very brief Bill, only 12 Clauses. Their assets is in Clauses 5 and 6. This is the key – the powers and the positions of the Director.

Clause 4 is the establishment of the Service; Clause 5 is the functions of the Service and Clause 6 is the powers of the Director. This is the essence of the Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is now codified. Before you draw from this legislation, from this regulation, so it makes the people at the Fiji Meteorological Services so happy and satisfied that, at least, it is now codified in one legislation.

In terms of the issue about weather warnings, that is the reason why it is not put in the Act - it is put in the Regulations because situations has arisen in the past. The reason why it is stated here is because it has arisen in the past and has caused confusion so there will be further discussion and that will come out in the Regulation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Clause 10 is standard where officers of the Corrections, Military and Police are indemnified from any civil and criminal liability. There is a standard provision, but I note what honourable Usamate said.

Sir, this Bill brings in budget allocation, it is also a forward-looking Bill. Clause 8(c) states, and I quote:

“The funds of the Service consist of the following –

(c) income from any commercial services provided by the Service.”

This morning, we had discussed - there is a wind of change, things change, of course. So, in this line of work, there are some expectations that they will provide some services to other providers. That is why it is put there. Where the situation arises, it is provided for by law. The Bill allows the Fiji Meteorological Services to continue their work but with confidence with having a legal base now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the work of the Fiji Meteorological Services was inherited from the South Pacific Air Transport Council, which is a branch of New Zealand Meteorological Services. The role and scope of the work of the Director of the Meteorological and Hydrological Services is big and vital, not just for Fiji, but for the region as we there are only six centres in the world that provide essential tropical cyclone-related information. This means that we are the leading Meteorological Office in the South Pacific region and, thus, the Fiji Meteorological Office names tropical cyclones as soon as they are detected.

We have the legal and moral obligation to smaller countries in the Pacific who are heavily reliant on Fiji for aviation and weather forecasting, such as Tuvalu, Niue, Kiribati, Cook Islands, Tokelau, Nauru, Tonga and Samoa. It is crucial to have this Bill passed, given that we now understand the importance of Meteorological and Hydrological Service and the role they play in Fiji and in the region.

The Bill is a reflection of the urgency which we seek to in order to establish the Meteorological and Hydrological Service. Early warning leads to early action and, therefore, action leads to having sustainable economic development, protection of life, livelihoods and property from meteorological and hydrological disaster and hazards. That is the reality of what is to come, once the Bill is passed. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I recommend the Bill to be passed.

MR. SPEAKER.- Now I offer the floor to the honourable Leader of the Opposition.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU. –Mr. Speaker, Sir. I will be very brief in my contribution as well. As alluded to by honourable Usamate, we support the Bill, but we are making some recommendations as well, if it is still relevant, and maybe the Government can take it into consideration.

I was not so much in favour of this coming under Standing Orders 51 for one session only rather than not referring it to the Committee, simply because of two reasons and, again, I will explain it today, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

As I had alluded to the other day, when this was drafted way back in 2016, it was just about Meteorological Services. When it came back, it included Hydrological Services as well, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I have given the history behind this Unit. This is based on experiences in the various offices that we have served in.

The first reason is the compartmentalization in work, but then on the other hand, the issue of overlap and duplication. Now, we have the Public Works again. Previously, as I have said, hydrological services used to be part of Water Supplies under PWD.

We also have hydrology functions in the Ministry of Mineral Resources, we also have Water Authority of Fiji, so this is again, I am talking about the overlaps and even duplication but at the same time, the compartmentalization of this. This is why I was raising this issue again because given what has progressed over the years as we were drafting this Bill.

The second reason and main one was on the role of Director Meteorological Services as the focal point for IPCC. Again, I say that this was drafted before the Climate Change Act 2021 came in. The honourable Minister keeps referring to the link between Meteorological Services and Director NDMO, but let me read from section 69 of the Climate Change Act 2021, and I quote:

“The Director, in consultation with the Fiji Meteorological Service and other relevant stakeholders, may build...”

I will not read the rest of it, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This is just because of the link between Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and Director, Fiji Meteorological Service as the focal point and, of course, their link with Director Climate Change.

Section 69(3) talks about integrated risk scenarios must be developed based on the scientific knowledge about climate change including relevant information published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the National Adaptation Plan.

The only reason why I am raising this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and of course if it is too late now may be something that Government can consider for the future because we know that climate change is the biggest existential threat that we are facing and we must be seen, particularly the role of Parliament in the development of legislations, we must make sure that all the legislation are in sync and of course particularly are aligned to the Conventions that we have ratified as well.

In the history of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was established way back in 1988 and approved by the General Assembly. It was between UN Environment (UNEP) and World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) and this is where the role of the Director of Fiji Meteorological Service becomes important as the focal point for science related issues when it comes to climate change.

I just want that to be considered by Government if it is too late now to refer it to the Committee but probably something that is worth looking into and this is something that we also have discussed with Director, NDMO because when the Climate Act also was drafted, we had not had COVID back then.

In terms of the emergency framework, these are the new developments and as we are just into the process of getting the new Bills now it would be good if these factors are included because it will save us a lot of work as well in the long term.

Again, may I just raise the issue again about Clause 10 of the Bill, probably it is just the wording, honourable Attorney-General because indemnification probably in the way it is in the context it does not fit well with the wordings that are in there. Probably, the exclusion of liability is the proper word rather than indemnification, Sir. Despite those comments we support the Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise before this august Parliament to express my support for the Meteorological and Hydrological Bill currently under debate.

Recently, the National Disaster Management Office in collaboration with Fiji Meteorological Office has installed community based flood early warning system in the Western Division with 17 new floodgates soon to be installed Central Division. This is achieved through the kind funding of NDMI Korea and the New Zealand Government. We support Section 3(b) which promotes public private engagement.

Selected sites for the above stated floodgates that I have stated above are critical because the long data sparse areas normally referred to as black spots because of the lack of hydrological data from some tributaries or flood prone areas in Fiji.

Just recently, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have seen the floods in Serua and that is one of the areas of interest that we would like to install this floodgates in as well in the future. This system will transmit critical flood data directly to the Meteorological Office to aid in community-based early flood warning systems. This support Section 5(1)(l) of the Bill.

The NDMO will implement similar systems for the hazards, accurate and timely early warning from the Fiji Meteorological Office are absolutely essential for the NDMO to effectively prepare for and respond to disasters ensuring better decision making and quick emergency responses that ultimately saves lives and property.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, weather patterns have become increasingly unpredictable as we all know due to the impact of climate change on our island nation and the Bill that is before us will enable the Fiji Meteorological Office to establish robust meteorological and hydrological systems to address this evolving weather conditions. It supports the development and implementation of strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of Climate Change.

At an international level Mr. Speaker, Sir, Section 3(c) of the Bill contributes to the UN mandate of Disaster Risk Reduction where accurate weather and water data are fundamental for risk assessment and management. One key area of collaboration with the Met. Office is impact based forecasting where the Meteorological office provides warnings alongside exposure information and the NDMO analysis the risk impacts and vulnerabilities in affected areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this contributes to the broader multi-hazard early warning system of Fiji which is being included in the Revised Disaster Bill which I had tabled earlier and formalising this ongoing work with a legal framework ensures accountability to both the government offices and the people of Fiji.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bill promotes economic resilience, sustainability by enhancing meteorological and hydrological services which will benefit various sectors such as agriculture, water ways and infrastructural planning.

The Bill also mandates the Fiji Meteorological office as a sole provider as shared to us by the honourable Usamate and during disasters incorrect warnings can cause public panic and providing these legal mandate will hold accountable any organisation other than Meteorological Office that issues such warnings. Thereby mitigating misinformation that can affect disaster response.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill will improve our ability to predict and monitor natural hazards thereby, reducing the risk and the impact of disaster such as floods, storms and droughts. Finally, this Bill complements the Natural Disaster Risk Bill which I tabled earlier and Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support this Bill.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Members for their contribution and insights into this Bill and also for their positive responses. Some of the issues raised are technical issues regarding the transmission of data, modelling system, et cetera, which are issues in terms of capacity within the organisation and that is something which this Bill and also the enhancement of the capacities within it can be addressed together with our development partners.

Especially, the scientific organisations, the issue regarding weather warnings, there was a mention of weather warnings from someone in the market but of course that is not something that we are referring to, it could be or it is from my understanding those who are purporting to be official warnings. That is something even can be clarified through regulatory provisions.

(Honourable Opposition Member interjects)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Please, address the Speaker. Yes, including that, if it is purporting to be official and not originating from a scientifically verified and officially recognised. The overlaps raised by the honourable Leader of the Opposition and duplication, of course, that continues to be an issue throughout most of the ministries and from the way I see it, it is an attitude problem in leadership but if you are a good leader whether you are Director Meteorology or Permanent Secretary, you should be able to communicate openly and with a good heart to resolve and address the issues.

At the end of the day what matters is how we deliver the service to the people. Duplication of functions and all these should be issues which should not hinder that and of course weather and hydrology, we note that in terms of moving forward and trying to enhance that in order to ensure that there is no duplication or confusion. Thank you, honourable Leader of the Opposition regarding IPCC and the Climate Change Act 2021, ensuring that the Director Meteorological Service continues to be the focal point and ensuring that the Director, Climate Change or PS Climate Change will of course be part of that, so that we can move forward together in a coordinated manner in terms of climate change and other international engagements that we do.

I would just like to acknowledge our development partners who have assisted the Meteorological Services: Australian DFAT, UNDP, Korean Meteorological Agency, JICA and various other scientific agencies which have assisted and continue to assist us. I commend the Bill for the approval and support of the Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[A Bill for an Act to provide for the Fiji Meteorological and Hydrological Services and the protection of livelihoods and property for Meteorological and Hydrological Disasters and Hazards and for related matters enacted by the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji. (Act No. of 2024)]

GOVERNMENT GUARANTEE - FIJI SUGAR CORPORATION LIMITED

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 131, and for the purposes of Section 145(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of Fiji, I move:

That Parliament approves -

1. the increase in Government Guarantee for the Fiji Sugar Corporation Limited's domestic borrowings of \$75 million for the period 1st August, 2022 to 31st May, 2028 which is the guarantee period by \$20 million; and
2. that FSC be exempted from paying any guarantee fee.

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

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we all know, FSC is Fiji's Sugar Milling Company incorporated by an Act of Parliament in 1972 to take over the milling activities from South Pacific Sugar Milling and CSR Limited in 1973. The Fiji Sugar Corporation operates three sugar Mills; two on Viti Levu in Lautoka and Rarawai, Ba, and third in Labasa, Vanua Levu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government has been guaranteeing FSC's domestic and offshore borrowing in the past years. The latest domestic guarantee cover was approved by Parliament on 28th July, 2022 whereby Parliament approved an additional guarantee to FSC of \$75 million for a guarantee period 1st August, 2022 to 31st May, 2028.

Sir, FSC on 8th August, 2022 and March 2024, executed and utilised the guarantee with the Bank of the South Pacific Limited for a loan facility of \$50 million and HFC Bank for an overdraft facility of \$25 million respectively. The FSC has fully exhausted the approved Government Guarantee limit.

On the other hand, the Government also guaranteed FSC's offshore borrowings which was approved on 15th September, 2017, whereby Parliament approved the extension of the Government Guarantee period for the EXIM Bank of India loan of USD\$50.4 million from 19th September, 2019 to 31st December, 2028. Both the parliamentary approvals exempted FSC from paying the guarantee fee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FSC has been operating at 75 percent production capacity for the past years and the company's operation has been adversely affected by various uncontrollable factors ranging from spate of natural disasters, volatility in the world sugar price, milling inefficiencies resulting from the failed mill upgrade project, deteriorating cane quality and decrease in cane production.

As of May 2023, Mr. Speaker, Sir, FSC's total operating cost is \$60.6 million, of which approximately 44 percent - \$26.7 million was dispensed as salaries and wages. This was an increase of about 8 percent when compared to \$56 million as total operating cost in 2022 financial year, the increase mainly attributed to increase in salaries to staff, except the Executive Management, rise in fuel price and post COVID-19 recovery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FSC had continuously been carrying net losses for the past 10 years. As at 31st May, 2023, FSC incurred a net loss of \$23 million, compared to \$44.3 million net losses for the 2022 financial year. FSC's total liabilities has acceded its total asset based for the last 10 years, technically meaning it has been insolvent during that period. This is well-known, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

For the 2024 financial year 2023 cane season, FSC anticipates better results, with cane production of 1.56 million tonnes and sugar makeup of around 139,628 tonnes, hence \$240.3 million in total revenue was expected from sugar proceeds and molasses for the financial year. It is projected that earnings before interest, excess depreciation amortisation for 2024 financial year will be a positive \$22.2 million.

The world sugar price, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we all know has moved in FSC's favour last year, currently hovering around US\$0.90 cents per pound compared to below \$0.14 cents per pound, some

two years back at the time of pricing - an increase of about 39 percent. The price had increased over US\$0.25 cents per pound. Late last year, it was projected to stay closer to about \$0.20 cents per pound. This is projected to improve the financial position of FSC, except for natural disasters and other unexpected events. It is expected, therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the key performance perimeters for the next five years will be achieved.

As of 30th April, 2024, FSC's outstanding borrowings guaranteed by Government stood at \$276.2 million, of which \$200.2 million is covered by Domestic Government Guarantee, and \$76 million which is about US\$32.7 million is covered by Offshore Government Guarantee.

The financial implications of this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as of 30th April, 2024, the total Government Guarantee debt stood at \$1.03 billion or \$1,030.8 million or 7.8 percent of Gross Domestic Product. With FSC accessing an additional \$20 million which is what the guarantee is asking, borrowings will increase the total Government Guarantee exposure to \$1,050.8 million or \$1.05 billion or 7.9 percent of GDP. In the event of a default, the Government will be liable for the guarantee borrowing of the FSC.

The Ministry of Finance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is also working with FSC and the Ministry of Sugar to monitor the restructuring efforts of the Board and Management of FSC, to ensure any fiscal risk that might arise and that are there are properly communicated, mitigated and managed by FSC with the Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the motion to Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion and similar to the previous one, I have a list of speakers in front of me, as follows:

1. Hon. P.D. Kumar;
2. Hon. Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry;
3. Hon. Leader of the Opposition; and
4. Hon. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation.

From my understanding, the Assistant Minister in the Prime Minister's Office would like to participate too so you have three.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion for the Government to guarantee FSC's borrowings of \$75 million for the period from 1st August 2022 to 31st May, 2028 and also to exempt FSC from paying a guarantee fee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we acknowledge the importance of the guarantee to FSC. It will help FSC to borrow, to ensure continuous production and export. But we are also very concerned the manner in which FSC is currently operating. That, I will discuss a little later but I want to simply say that guarantee is important. It will only kick in if FSC cannot pay the loan. So, let us hope that over a period of time, FSC improves, as the honourable Minister has highlighted, that the world sugar price is looking favourable and if it does that, then obviously it is very good for the Government, for the people and FSC.

Now, I must say, unlike the Opposition of the past, we understand that the role of the Opposition is not merely to oppose but also to support beneficial proposals from the Government. And this is one set of proposal and there are many others we have supported as you can see.

We support the motion because we know the significance of the sugar industry to Fiji's economy. It not only supports export reserves but also safeguards our foreign exchange. During COVID period it was a sugar industry that was bringing in foreign exchange and keeping our foreign reserve intact. Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, FSC is the major employer in Fiji, supporting thousands of jobs directly and in indirectly.

Most sugarcane farms are in rural areas where economic opportunities are limited. This morning, we heard from the honourable Minister for Agriculture. He was talking about the importance of supporting agriculture to eradicate poverty. Sir, in the same way, I also believe by supporting FSC, it means reducing the risk of poverty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with a Government Guarantee, FSC could secure financing for improving efficiency and productivity, reduce reliance on just raw sugar exports.

There has been and it must be noted by all of us. There has been a lot of support given directly or indirectly by the Government over the years with only one hope, that all players in the sugar sector will play their part in increasing the sugar production, and that is where the failure is.

Unfortunately, despite the assistance, the sugar sector is not performing to its optimum. We can blame one another till the cows come home. We can start from the Lome Convention when Fiji was receiving preferential sugar prices and we can ask ourselves why we did not upgrade our mills or diversify into other products during the golden period. We can also talk about the non-renewable of land leases around 1997 when farmers have to find shelter in informal settlements along Suva and Nausori corridor. We can also talk about large sums of loan taken from EXIM Bank in 2004-2005 to upgrade our Mills and we know that the Mills were not upgraded to that standard. We can also talk about the assistance offered by European Union that was not taken up to improve farming and milling.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the solution of the problem is to remove politics from this industry, that is the only solution. We need to build the sugar industry purely based on the business model and now honourable Singh is there, he has been running his business, and I am sure he will be able to bring that business sense into the operation of various institutions linked to the sugar sector and I believe this is what is missing. They have been relying too much on the Government for assistance. I want to speak on the importance of diversification so that the Government does not have to guarantee FSC loans and how the various agencies can start moving into that direction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is very little diversification of crops adopted by the sugarcane farmers. When I am talking about diversification, it starts with farmers, the millers and also other subsidiaries or you can say, organisations, for example, Sugarcane Farmers Fund as well as the South Pacific Fertilizer company. So, let us start with the farmers,

We were quite surprised because in Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we invited all the stakeholders, we had a discussion with FSC and other stakeholders and I was taken aback when the Field Officers at FSC gave their opinion and they believed that if farmers start planting alternative crops they might move away from sugarcane. So, they were more worried from that perspective. But on the other hand, we have iTLTB that says that, good husbandry must be practised. The soil should be in good state and if the soil is not looked after, then there can be penalties to the farmers. But it just does not make sense and we can see that in all these, agriculture is far removed. They are not anywhere near sugarcane farms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me talk about FSC. The FSC has not diversified into alternate products, they are producing ethanol from bagasse for their own use but they can do better than that by using

hog fuel, et cetera, to produce more energy for electricity grid, but that is not happening to the level that we desire. But what else can they do? Can they move towards refined and specialised sugars to better manage their revenue and cash flow risk? Mr. Speaker, Sir, by diversifying, FSC can reduce reliance on just one single product.

We have the Sugarcane Growers Fund. By now, it should have become a financial lender for all farms, generating profits for cane farmers so that cane farmers benefit from this diversification. We understand that the Sugarcane Growers Fund was established by cane farmers. It does not mean that it should be just there for the cane farmers, they can diversify into lending and the interest they generate, they can also offer loans to the cane farmers at a much reduced rate. So, it is a win-win situation, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

We have South Pacific Fertilizer company - a subsidiary of Sugarcane Growers Fund. Over the years, the government has been subsidising the cost of fertilizer. But did the South Pacific Fertilizer make any effort to change its financial position? Did they diversify or tried to diversify? They have not, Mr. Speaker, Sir. They are still blending fertilizers but farmers are demanding fertilizers based on their soil type. They have not fully moved into becoming the supplier of fertilizers to the non-sugar sector. There is an opportunity, but that opportunity has not been ceased.

Mechanical harvesters are there but co-operatives face the problem of spare parts and qualified mechanics for repairs and maintenance. Why these services could not be provided by the Sugar Sector? They had not looked at this area at all and when we go out in the field, when we meet farmers and the co-operatives, they have been complaining about this particular issue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Sugar Sector should have embarked on this diversification programme probably decades ago. We should have had a Sugar Refinery Company decades ago. This merely depicts the lack of foresight and goodwill. More are broadly diversifying the revenue base would position the Sugar Sector to offer better prices to farmers. Our problem is, we are trying to seek efficiency and productivity from institutions established during the Colonial era. Other countries have moved away from these structures and modernised the law so that the Sugar Sector operates on a business model, and we have not done that purely because of politics.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of these institutions, I remember in one of our meetings when I questioned the people around the table and my question was very simple, that you have visited so many countries and seen how the countries were running their sugar mill, the whole Sugar Sector. What can you tell us about the institutional structures they have? Do they have the same institution structures that we have at the moment? Some of them actually just smiled way, but we can see there is a push and pull factor at this level. While we are trying to improve the Sugar Industry, we will not be able to achieve unless and until we make some drastic changes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have heard from honourable Deputy Prime Minister, we have another opportunity knocking on our door. With an increase in world market price for sugar, I do not know how long it is going to stay but I am aware that around 2017, FSC faced a 33 percent reduction in the world sugar export prices, so that was quite significant. And you can probably see that, that is the reason why they need assistance from the Government - to keep the company afloat. But I believe that with the sugar price increase, there is an opportunity and we should grab that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the world's largest sugar producers are moving towards ethanol while others are facing similar problems like Fiji where production has dropped, and a good example is Cuba. India is moving towards ethanol production, which means they will be demanding more sugar from other countries, and they have gone into high value product. In other words, if you produce ethanol, you get better price than the raw sugar in the world market stage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to focus on how to raise efficiency, how to raise production and how to build the confidence of farmers in the industry. At the end of the day, I believe we have created so many structures and so many institutions, but at the end of the day, the farmers are the losers. They are depending on all these institutions to work in harmony and improve the revenue so that they can gain from it. But in fact, it looks like it is the other way round. We are just trying to use farmer's money to keep this institutions going but they are not getting the level of return they should get.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with these words I support the motion that was presented by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Premila for all her sentiments and suggestions for the Sugar Industry. One thing I will have to assure this honourable Parliament is that the first thing that I did when I became the Minister was to get the mill Board for FSC who understood about the operations of the Sugar Industry.

One particular person I made the Chairman was Mr. Nitya Reddy because he was a former accountant of all the mills in Fiji, including the Ghief Accountant, before he actually migrated to New Zealand. Ever since he came to the new Board, he has taken a new direction on FSC. I assure Parliament that 'yes', he is doing basically what we want and what Parliament wants and to bring the sugar industry back on the street. Mr. Speaker Sir, that will of course make FSC more efficient and make FSC profitable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the motion by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance. Sir the rationale behind this motion is to embed the unwavering confidence that the Sugar Industry is on the right particularly towards a robust and sustainable future. This confidence is based on several strategic initiatives and notable positive developments within the industry.

Firstly, I would like to highlight that we have significantly expanded our support programmes for the sugar industry. The number of programmes have increased from 6 to 13 in the current financial year, demonstrate our commitment to the comprehensive support for all aspects of the industry.

Secondly, we have actively been addressing the long strategic issues of the land leases by providing subsidies on the premium payments. This initiative is designed to elevate financial background on the farmers and ensure that land remains accessible and affordable for the cane cultivations. As I have explained this is written in the earlier response to the question raised by honourable Virendra Lal.

Furthermore Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are engaging more with the younger farmers and promoting the use of mechanisation as we recognise that these elements are crucial for the future of the sugar industry. By promoting the youth involvements and modern agriculture technologies we are building a more resilient and efficient economic sector.

HON. MEMBER.- Youth involvement.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Additionally, we have achieved a remarkable milestone by making a high speed payment for the 2022 crop in the rate of \$91.38 per tonne.

Sir, just for the information of Parliament, we actually will be paying this fourth cane payment which comes out of Tuesday are \$21.75. This is the highest paid for the fourth cane payment but not

only that, after paying this fourth cane payment, a total payment will be \$101.08 which is higher than last year.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Hear, hear!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Of course, there is another last payment after that is called partial payment that will be another \$2 or \$3. We are looking at...

HON. MEMBER.- No money.

HON. P.K. BALA.- No pride than sugar.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- We are looking at about \$105 at the end. So what I am saying, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this current payment we will be injecting \$34.1 million in the economy. This significant payment reflects our commitment to ensuring fair compensation for our hardworking farmers and providing them with the financial stability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the groundwork of the Coalition Government is evident and it is clear that the industry is part of the rebuild. The approval of this motion will be instrumental in ensuring that this recovery continues unbeaten. By increasing the Government's guarantee and exempting from the guarantee fees we are providing a necessary financial support and confidence that will enable FSC to meet its commitment towards our hardworking farmers.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the purpose of the motion is not just a financial manoeuvre, it is a strategic step towards securing the future of the Sugar industry. Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I conclude, I would like to say what actually was the background. Every time that FSC needed funds because we have a sugar buyer in UK, we had to borrow a short-term fund from them which costed FSC about \$1 million interest for the 45 days borrowing.

Now apart from that, the buyer was double dipping. First, it means we have to sell our sugar that is currently on the fields. They come and buy our sugar at that price and they basically tie our hands and legs and the gate price. First, we are losing by selling sugar at lower price, then we have to go back and borrow a short-term funding which was costing us a million dollars US so I am saying here what the idea now with the current Board of Directors we have had discussion with.

Let us increase our Government Guarantee, let us have our local banks borrow whereby we can negotiate with HFC, FDB or any bank for a short-term funding and, of course, the interest rate that we will pay will remain in Fiji. So, this whole idea to have these kinds of facilities, that as for FSC, they will not use this for capital projects. This will facilitate that each time FSC needs refunding they can go back and apply for short term funding from local banks. So Mr. Speaker, Sir, that's the whole idea of this government guarantee.

I urge all the members of Parliament to support this motions as it is a vital component for our ongoing efforts to revitalize and sustain the Sugar Industry for the benefit of all Fijians. Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now offer the floor to the honourable Leader of the Opposition. The floor is yours, Sir.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU. - Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I also wish to contribute to the motion raised by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance to increase the Government Guarantee for the Fiji Sugar Corporation Ltd domestic borrowings of \$750 million for

the period of 1st August 2022 to 31st May 2028 and of course that the FSC be exempted from paying the guarantee fee.

As alluded to by my colleague, honourable Premila Kumar, we fully support the motion, given the importance of FSC and how it benefits, not only the farmers and the people involved but of course how it helps us economically too as a country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again as alluded to by the honourable Minister, this government guarantee is something that is not new and of course the last guarantee was given on 28th July 2022 and we are just continuing with it, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Of course, we will all agree that we need FSC to continue its work but of course with more efficiency as well and particularly profitability and that is something that we all hope will be achieved sometimes in the future.

I thank the honourable Minister, for the changes that he has stated, particularly the work that the Board is undertaking but of course, this requires the collective efforts of all key stakeholders and again, I want to emphasize that Mr. Speaker, Sir. Today, we have talked at length about land that has already been made available and I think the big question, particularly in terms of the land that is available is the question on utilization.

I looked at the last Annual Report for 2023 and just looking at the Labasa 640,000 tonnes of cane, that is well below what Vanua Levu particularly, the cane belt areas is capable of. I know during the heydays, it was around 2 – 3 million for Labasa alone and that's the challenge that we all have, and we hope we can work together on this.

Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are still open to the Special Committee that was part of His Excellency's opening address last year, the commitment by Government to form a Select Committee to look at the Sugar Industry, probably not just Sugar but of course the whole Agricultural sector, something that has been circulating as well behind the scenes, particularly in the work of the Committees given the importance of agriculture and how it contributes to our national development, economic progress and most importantly, the need for us to diversify and broaden the economic pace so that we can be in a better position particularly to meet all the expectations that are there before us. Perhaps, the only other issue that I wish to raise I have talked about land utilisation as alluded too by honourable Premila Kumar, these all boils down to increase production, particularly in the field.

FSC, of course, is operating well below its capacity and the only way to improve apart from diversification I think the basic is to let us just produce more cane in all the three mills so that it will help not only in the financial position of FSC because that is how FSC makes its money. The more sugarcane it crushes the more sugar we have. We sell and that is how it can make its operating cost and of course, reinvest as well something that is badly needed so that we can come away from this Government guarantee. That is the key question for us.

The Sugar Research Institute plays a very important role in this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the identification, research, selection of the right varieties and that is something that I also wish to also say in here with all due respect having served as Commissioner in Vanua Levu, it is the FSC extension workers. We need to shake them. They need to do more because my observation, it seems that they focused more on cane logistics rather than the normal extension work that is expected of FSC field workers. This is an area. They need to work with the farmers.

Most of the farmers are unsupervised. They only come and see them when its time to fix the road because the mill is about to open in the next few weeks. That is when you see all the vehicles running all over the places and so forth, so they focussed more on logistics rather than the basic work which is on farm extension. That is something that they really need to do to improve cane production.

I see from the honourable Members from the other side that I have to sit down now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but that is my contribution. Again, FSC is important and let us work together to grow the industry to improve on its efficiency and most importantly, ensure that it goes back to a level of profitability.

I fully support the motion, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to speak in support of the motion before Parliament for the Guarantee to the FSC borrowing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will take this from tourism and aviation perspective. In that, we need to ensure that FSC continues to operate viably for the production of ethanol known as the sustainable aviation field that will drive aviation in the future. I had a brief Parliament on a Ministerial Statement on the importance of SAF that we cannot do without it. It has to be part of aviation going forward, going hand in hand with our tourism industry.

At this point, Mr. Speaker, indications are that we need to produce about 3.5 million tonnes of cane to enable us to produce ethanol at a level that we would require in this country for our aviation. Our production right now is around 1.6 million tonnes, for the record we have had 4.2 billion so it is possible, it is durable that we can get back to about 3.5 million tonnes of canes to enable us to produce efficient ethanol. The sentiments expressed by honourable Kumar is very true, I think the fragmentation within the industry is not helping.

I was a cane farmer myself. When I was here with the Economic Affairs Committee we had consultations for Bill 19 and Bill 20 designed by the previous Government to revamp the industry and what we saw was that it is quite fragmented and if you can reconcile all those institutions within FSC, it can bring back the production that we want.

Today, there is about 40,000 hectares that are available for cane but the yield per hectare is about 47 right now. We have farmers in this country, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one in Labasa that we met during that time, he was producing 125 tonnes per hectare and I was told in Nadi, there was someone producing 150 tons per hectare. If you can up the yield, we can double or triple what we currently do today. But it means a more cohesion within those institutions that are part of the FSC.

On ethanol, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as indicated by honourable Kumar, some countries have gone into ethanol in a big way and that is somewhere Fiji should be headed to, there is of course, SAF is quite expensive these days but as the whole world gears up for the production of SAF because we want to be net zero by 2050, the aviation industry in the world.

With the support from the developed countries at the COP28, the commitment by the developed countries to help finance developing countries like Fiji is there, technology transfer is also there. Our capacity building is also there. In the course of trying the cost of producing SAF will come down, so Fiji should get itself up to produce its own ASF, it will be tragic that we have the few stocks through strain and then we export our fuel for aviation. As I said there is an opportunity with ADB to carry out the feasibility study for FSC and Fiji Airways on the production of ethanol in Fiji and I have also asked them to look at cassava because cassava is also a feed stock for ethanol.

All in all, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have indicated it could be transformative for Fiji when you go into SAF production. Cassava has grown everywhere in the country and properly harnessed, it could transform the market for us at the village level and across the country. Tourism is critical for the country and this ethanol should be produced to help our aviation and help our tourism industry hence the need to strengthen FSC and position it to produce SAF in the coming year. On aviation, Mr.

Speaker, Sir, if I could just go back to what I said yesterday that tourism today is about \$3.3 billion and in the next four years, it can be \$4.3 billion.

So, it is quite significant and we spoke about liberalisation of aviation policy and let me just share with our people across the isle that we all subscribe to a restrictive aviation policy all this while but things have changed hence the liberalisation of our air aviation policy. As I said yesterday, right now with America we can only fly to Honolulu, Los Angeles and San Francisco but we need to go into all the ports in the United States. All that has changed the thinking, the Americans are saying, "Liberalize your Aviation Policy and then we can talk about you coming in." That is why I spoke against open air in September last year, but I have changed my tune this year, it is for that reason - the reason that, if we do not do it, we do not get access to American ports where lies a huge part of the future of our tourism industry. So, please, be assured that it is not a change that was made without the due thought process and, of course, all our negotiations, Fiji Airways was part of it. So, we did not go out there and negotiate something separate from Fiji Airways, it was all there, Mr. Speaker. I just wanted our people on the other side to be assured that we are doing this in the best way for Fiji, the Tourism Industry and our national airways.

On that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for ethanol, SAF is very critical, and as I have said once, I never thought that one day I would be talking about FSC's future with Fiji Airways and vice-versa. But that is the way forward for Fiji, and I would like to see that we continue to support FSC for the future of aviation in this country.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in support of the motion before Parliament. Before I begin, I wish to pay tribute to the late Mr. Eliko Bomani, a former civil servant who has just passed away earlier this week.

Mr. Bomani from Namuana, Tavuki, Kadavu, is the son of the former Alliance Party Minister, Mr. Solomon Momoivalu. He joined the Public Service straight from Marist Brothers High School and rose through the ranks to reach the post of the Deputy Secretary in the Prime Minister's Office in 2012.

We offer our warm condolences to his *Mataqali Verata*, his wife - Patricia, daughter - Letila Momoivalu and the *vanua* of Erauraki. May his soul rest in peace and rise in glory.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we have heard from this afternoon, there has been a lot of discussions on the Sugar Industry and, of course, the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs in our various trips across the country. We have noted that Sugar Industry is not sustainable because the small farmers are facing the brunt- they are not able to survive with the current small acreage that they have. I think the future of the industry is to make sure that we have larger farms and more economical to produce.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the things that has been missing which I have looked through all the reports, is a more coherent policy which needs to be formulated. Of course, I would like to thank the honourable Minister, who has come up with an idea of having this policy. We have requested FAO, they will be starting in June to come up with this new policy and this new policy will lay the ground rules - how many farmers do we really need? How many acres do we need there on the ground? Of course, where are the markets? These will be clearly stipulated in this policy.

I would like to thank the honourable Minister. He has this foresight, he has very strategic thinking about the new way to address the challenges that we face here in this industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to emphasise the need to adequately streamline where FSC is sourcing its finance from. Currently, FSC obtains the loans and finances from a number of financial

institutions. Once we have the policy in place and a much more clear roadmap, perhaps may be it will be prudent for FSC to be looking at a sole financial provider. Of course, once we put together all the various financial sources into one single source, we would benefit from a single financial provider that offers a preferential interest rate. Of course there is a lot of this in the market. I am sure that FSC Board will be able to look into that. I think that is all from my side, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and of course I do support the motion before Parliament.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will try and be as brief as possible. I want to thank all the honourable Members for their support and some of the issues raised.

The sugar industry including the institutions within the industry have been a big challenge. The signals that we have provided as a Government over the last 17 months, has seen a new sense of confidence amongst the sugarcane farmers, I was in Labasa last weekend, there was a first Northern Development Summit Innovation and Entrepreneurship and what I was told, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the sense of confidence, there are a lot of farmers a sort of getting back, working towards trying to increase their production and it is largely coming from the price incentive with the highest cane price ever in the history of Fiji. Last year was \$91, this year the fourth cane payment has just been announced today of \$21.75, again, the highest ever and the final price is expected to be more than \$100. These are price signals that are actually motivating the farmers to produce more because they can possibilities of better income.

The Government on its part, Mr. Speaker, Sir, continue with some of the programmes that were there including subsidies for fertilizer and weedicides. We allocated \$2 million within Ministry of Sugar Budget for lease subsidies and in addition to that as the honourable Minister for Sugar pointed out, the Government provided further \$1.2 million for the renewal of 218 agricultural leases of which about 45 average. What we have done in the last 14 to 15 months, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as well as in the last Budget has given the signal. The honourable Leader of the Opposition made two very good points and I agree with him wholeheartedly. He talked about the share extension and training.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji for a long time whether you talk about FSC, whether you talk about agriculture, probably one of the best research extension and training programmes and unfortunately in the last so many years that was completely dismantled and it is now being built and that is very important because if farmers to do not get that kind of attention from FSC and other institutions within the industry then a lot of the issues particularly planting the right cane variety and the Minister talked about the wrong variety that a lot of farmers were introduced to and where the sugar content was much lower. So, I think as a Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are addressing that.

The second good point that the honourable Leader of the Opposition made was about the farm level production and he is right. If you do not have cane production, nothing will work., FSC will not be profitable, no arm of the industry will work. The 2006 European Union funding of \$350 million, I think honourable Members perhaps you do not need to understand that. During the late Mr. Qarase's term as a Prime Minister that loan was negotiated (it is not a loan, it was a grant) which was going to look at three components in the industry. They were going to look at alternative livelihood, it was going to look upgrading of the mills and it was going to look at Research Extension efficiency and effectiveness at the farm level so that farmers income was increased.

Obviously, we lost that in the last 15 years. No substantial funds were injected to improve in fact on the other hand we lost the railways which is been a major contributor to the high cost of production and transportation of cane for the famers. So that is something that the Government is looking at and hopefully there will be some improvement.

The issue about the lease renewals, the honourable Leader of the Opposition said in 1997 and 1998 in fact I want to give them some statistics. Under the SVT government led by the honourable Prime Minister at that time in 1998, 82 percent of all the leases were renewed. And those that wanted to move in fact the schemes in Navua and other places were set up to do that. So we understand that as a Government and we have been in the last 14 months addressing that head-on and that is already showing positive results for the industry.

Honourable Kumar, talked about politics. In fact, it is the other way around when politics was there sugar production was very high. There is a lot of knowledge-sharing between Sugar Cane Growers Councils, various institutions and the mechanisms within those institutions provided that but I agree with the points raised that all these institutions, there is no room for these institutions – the Sugar Research Institute, Sugarcane Growers Fund, FSC to be working in silos. They need to come together.

They need to understand that all these institutions are very important and I think the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry has already made that very public statement and I hope that the stakeholders, particularly FSC, will look at restructuring. As I have said before, the Ministry of Finance in working with the Ministry of Sugar will ensure that appropriate restructuring takes place and that FSC manages its affairs in an official and effective manner.

I thank all the honourable Members for the support to the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

REVIEW REPORT – STANDING ORDERS OF PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, I move:

That the Amendments recommended by the Standing Orders Committee in its Report in the Review of the Standing Orders of Parliament to the Republic of Fiji be adopted today by Parliament.

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

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, I wish to thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak and debate the Amendment as recommended by the Standing Orders Committee in the review of the Standing Orders of the Parliament to the Republic of Fiji as we undertaken in the last couple of meetings.

(Laughter)

As you are aware, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that I tabled the report of the Standing Order Committee this morning after careful deliberation between the honourable Members of the Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I had alluded to when I tabled the report of the Standing Orders Committee this morning, I informed the Parliament that the Standing Orders Committee met on four separate occasions. On 1st May, 3rd May, 17th May and finally yesterday the 22nd of May, 2024 during lunch break.

On those occasions the Committee met and discussed Amendments to the Standing Orders. There were Amendments proposed by the Opposition which were missed during the Amendments to the Standing Orders last year, for obvious reasons as well as from the secretariat upon discussions with the UNDP consultant, Mr. Kevin Deveaux.

At this juncture, I must convey my real appreciation on the extensive deliberation and work undertaken by the Standing Orders Committee and for reaching agreements on the Amendments. In that regard, I seek the honourable Members support for the motion this evening to enable the proposed Amendments by the Committee to be adopted.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee agreed to the following to allow the secretariat to finalise the minutes of the meetings and draft of the Amended Standing Orders as well as the Committee's Report on these documents were subsequently then conveyed to the Committee members for their perusal, their comments and finalisation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the proposed Amendments to the Standing Orders which have been circulated to all honourable Members of Parliament are necessary because they impact the way Parliament conducts itself now and in moving forward. These proposed Amendment relate to performance, functions and the workings of our Parliament.

In considering and reviewing the practices and procedures of Parliament, the proposed amendments which the Committee agreed to during its meetings on the four separate occasions as mentioned earlier in terms of the review of the Standing Orders of the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji I hereby present it to Parliament as mandated by Standing Order 128 which all honourable Members have hopefully received a hard as well as an e-copy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will now proceed to the proposed amendments and these are only in the following provisions which relate to Standing Orders 37, 42, 45, 110, 122, 126, 127 and 137 respectively.

The proposed amendments for Standing Order 37, where it is proposed to have a new insertion in the current provision where “when a petition is moved, it should be seconded and debated before the honourable Speaker proposes a question on the motion” to Parliament before it is considered whether it would be referred to the relevant Standing Committee or otherwise.

On Standing Order 42, it is proposed amendment to increase Oral Questions to 10 by increasing the Opposition Oral Questions to five and by increasing the Government's Oral Questions to five as opposed to the current eight questions that we now presently practice.

On Standing Order 45, it is proposed as an amendment to the timing on asking Oral and Supplementary Questions to one minute and the responses by the Ministers must be ten minutes for the Oral Questions however the responses to the supplementary questions by the honourable Ministers would be from five minutes to 10 minutes. That is the first set of amendments. Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The next set of amendments, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are relating to Committee issues on Standing Orders 109(2)(b), 110(3), 112, 126 and 127. The proposed amendment pursuant to Standing Order 109(2)(b) was the inclusion of the word “aviation” as part of the mandate of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs as well as the proposed amendment to Standing Order 110 in terms of enquiry or intention to investigate component of the Standing Committees where terms of references would have to be provided by the Chairpersons but the terms of preference by, Mr. Speaker, would be used by the relevant Committee wanting to do enquiries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also on the proposed amendment on Standing Order 122 was in regards to a resolution on the appointment of the appointing of sub-committees outlining its membership component and voting rights will spark of the sub-committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the proposed amendment to Standing Order 126 is on the Whips of each Party to be included as Members to the House Committee because of the roles all Whips play in each of our political parties in Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as well as the proposed amendment to Standing Order 127, that before a Member is referred to the Privileges Committee, they should be given the opportunity to give a personal explanation pursuant to Standing Order 80 and at the discretion of the honourable Speaker, the matter may or may not be referred to the Privileges Committee.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the proposed amendment to Standing Order 137(2) where the correct amendment to the number is visible and is to be adopted.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion and as you would have known that by Convention, the Report of the Standing Orders Committee is a functional document, recommended amendments are reflected in Annexure 1 of the Report and the Minutes of the proceedings of the Committee are reflected in the Annexure 2 of the Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as alluded to earlier, I convey much appreciation on the extensive deliberation that was conducted and work undertaken by the Standing Orders Committee on a very bipartisan level. I thank the Members and the Standing Orders Committee from both sides of Parliament and I hereby commend these amendments to Parliament and respectfully seek each of our Members of Parliaments' support for the adoption of the proposed amendments to the Standing Orders.

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

1. Hon. A.A. Maharaj;
2. Hon. Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration; and
3. Hon. V. Naupoto.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank honourable Vosarogo for presenting this particular report that had some extensive deliberation when the Committee was sitting. I would like to thank the Committee, even though a bit late, but the submission that was actually submitted by Opposition was finely discussed by the Committee and I am grateful to say that at least from our recommendation, four recommendations did make through which was quite substantial, especially being outnumbered in Standing Order Committee when we have five sitting from the Government side and only one representing the Opposition. I think that is something that we need to look at in the future as to how we can change the membership of the Standing Orders Committee to make it a bit bipartisan in nature.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the first one that I would like to discuss a bit on is Standing Order 37 whereby a debate can be carried out by Members, we do know that most of the time Opposition Members bring in petitions. However, as discussed in the Committee stage, there would be other members who might actually hail from that particular location where the subject matter is from and they would like to contribute as it is their constituency as well and they represent the people from that place so they should be given a chance to speak before an informed decision is made by the Members whether they want to actually vote in favour of the petition or not.

Secondly, there are 10 questions and additional question coming to Opposition.

Next one is, Whips to be included in the House Committee. We have seen the Whips are the ones who are communicating basically with all the staff and House Committee is looking after the wellbeing and welfare of all the Members. It is appropriate for the Whips to be sitting on the House Committee.

Fourth, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we propose and we are happy that is passed and part of the Standing Committees whereby a Member of Parliament is given a chance to explain himself, if there is a matter of privilege. We are dealing with honourable Members and I think it is only right that the Member is heard in public before a decision is made by the honourable Speaker, whether a Member should be sent to Privileges Committee or not.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank you for being on our side when we were having a discussion because you also provided us some very fruitful contribution and that is one of the reasons why these matters were accepted by the Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are certain things that I would like to bring the attention that were not accepted by the Committee and as the saying goes, we should practice what we preach. If we are given a chance to change what is not being practiced, it would be a good opportunity for people to have and use that moment to change what you have been preaching about.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- One of them was the use of Standing Order 51, as stated in the meeting as well. We have nothing against the use of Standing Order 51, the Constitution allows it, the Standing Order allows it but our concern was if a Bill is lly brought under Standing Order 51 and to be debated and passed in a single sitting and is not referred to any particular Committee, the Members should not be restricted with any timeframe to scrutinize that particular Bill. At least in this Parliament, we should not actually have a timeframe whereby we restrict the Members to one hour or half an hour or two hours, especially if it is not being scrutinize by the Committee.

As I have said, we should practice what we preach. The Opposition has been preaching this for the past eight years so it was a time for them to change the practice but unfortunately, they did not.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other thing that we requested was for Ministerial Statements ...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Get it right.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- ... to be 10 minutes. During the past eight years, there were two parties in Opposition, so they were actually given five minutes each which accumulated to 10 minutes. I am not too sure what Government is afraid of, of giving us that 10 minutes to actually response to their Ministerial Statement but unfortunately did not go through and we are still stuck with five minutes. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you know by the time we stand up and get ready, two and half minutes has gone, by the time we come to the subject, the bell rings. So, if you want some fruitful and very important discussion with regards to the Ministerial Statement, I think we should have gone with the 10 minutes.

The other thing that we have some gentlemen agreement now as part of the Committee was, that Parliament be given precedence. I know it is not part of the Standing Orders, it was supposed to be amended in such a way that we can actually have Members to give precedence to Parliament. One of the reasons why we brought this one was, either you are Member of a Committee, either you are an Assistant Minister, Minister or Prime Minister.

First and foremost is, we are Members of Parliament, you are given that position just because you are Member of Parliament. So if you are in Parliament, your responsibility is to Parliament and to the people who have voted us because we have actually seen in Committee stages, even in the Select Committee or Standing Committee whereby Members they do not appear in Committees and the normal work of the Committees cannot go through either it be a Select Committee or Standing Committee. That was the request from our side to be incorporated unfortunately, it did not go through.

The last one Mr. Speaker, Sir, we did recommend and we thought that the honourable Prime Minister would take this happily after years of experience in Parliament of having a 30-minute question and answer session for Prime Minister but unfortunately, that was declined as well.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- But literally, we thought that would be taken onboard as well but unfortunately, it is not. Nevertheless, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we do support the motion that is before Parliament and we do support the changes that are coming to the Standing Order Committee.

HON. K.K. LAL.- *Levu na vosa.*

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I thank the honourable Minister for moving this motion and the contribution so far, particularly from my respective colleague, the former Whip for the Opposition.

The proposed amendments as being articulated by the honourable Minister for Lands and I think that is actually quite clear to all of us, there is really no need to go too long into the details. But I would just like to make some clarifications on some of the issues raised by honourable Maharaj. We do not share anything in the Government, we are the Government after all. But I think, what I quite like Mr. Speaker, Sir, about the discussions in the Standing Orders Committee that there was enough goodwill on the part of the Government to accommodate some of the wishes, and these wishes as you very rightfully enforced in the Committee are good for democracy and also good for Parliament and our people. I have been in the Standing Orders Committee since the inception of all these sessions of Parliament.

I have never enjoyed this environment of reaching consensus and I think it is quite a good spirit to enhance and I think the more we do this, I actually suggested this to you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as Chair of the Committee, that none of these orders are cast in stone. There is always provision for it to be changed as we go along. And as we mature as a Parliament, I am sure that a lot of these Standing Orders that has been the cause for concern over all this while will eventually be out the window, so as to allow much greater room for discussion, whether you be on this side of Parliament or that side, it is Parliament that actually reigns at the end of the day.

Just on the matter of Standing Order 51, I have heard what honourable Maharaj has said but I know that I have moved the position of the Government to keep the order as it were. But I think as we go through developing maturity on the side of the Government that only really on matters that are really urgent that we need to use this order. Otherwise, I believe one of the steps that we are taking,

particularly these Bills that were passed today that had to go into Committee, first thing we need to continue to develop, allow more time for speaking and allow more time for scrutiny by the Committee. That can only be good for Parliament and the people but for now I think, the way Standing Order 51 is worded is adequate enough to accommodate all of our wishes until such time that we make it more liberal.

Precedence of parliamentary business, I think, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee had spoke at length about this, particularly my opposition to the fact to actually write in the Standing Order the issue about precedence of Parliament. One of the main reasons for that, is that, Parliament must take precedence over everything, where it is necessary that either Members of the Opposition or Government must attend. I think it is quite clear that every once in a while, particularly in Government, there are times that we cannot be here. It means no disrespect but I think it is good Parliament practice that if you are not able to attend, you must seek the leave of the Speaker to be excused from Parliament and I think that is good practice and that is why we had asked for the provision not to be included.

Prime Minister's question time and urgent question, I think the provision of urgent oral questions to be posed to Government takes care of a lot of the urgent issues, so I believe at this time, the need for the Prime Minister's question time and all the circus that encompasses it. I think we have been to the parliaments in the UK, Australia and New Zealand, you watch question time, it is just like a movie. It does not really augur well for the spirit of the Fijian Parliament which is part of the reason we think that maybe that should be kept in the back burner for a while.

Nevertheless, I would really like to thank the contribution of the Government in this process and also my honourable colleagues from the other side in the discussions that we reached and I would like to re-emphasise the fact that the more this Parliament becomes mature, I think that will gives us the opportunity to continue to review these set of orders for what is best for this Parliament and best for our country.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, we are talking about a document that guides the work of this Parliament, the People's House as we come in here and do the work of the people. It is quite an important document. When I went in to the first meeting, Sir, I realised I was the only one sitting on one side, all the other side was full and I thought to myself, "man, this is so unfair, I represent 26 seats and I get outnumbered all the time" my thought was, I am representing the Opposition and then it dawned on me that that was the wrong thought.

I think that the right thinking when we go to amend this document is just to make sure that we the representatives of the people, when we come into this Parliament to do the work of the people that these documents allows us to do so and do so fairly. I think that in the past and maybe now, there is still this thinking of writing this document to benefit either that side of Parliament or this side.

I think it should be written to benefit Parliament to ensure that both sides function properly to allow us to do the work of the people properly.

All the recommendations that are in the document now, in my view are recommendations that will allow us to do our job as representatives of the people better, not good for the Opposition or good for Government, it is good for the Parliament as a whole for us to do the job as representatives of the people in this Parliament.

I hope, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that as we go forward in looking at this document under your leadership, governs what we do in this the House of the People, that we will move away a little bit

from whether this benefits the Opposition or it benefits the Government, and you look at it as, “Okay, this document allows the Parliament of Fiji to do their job and do their properly.” I think that some of the changes that the honourable Minister was alluding to maybe will begin to go out and shape this document into one that is really focused on the work that we do as the representatives of the people.

I support all the changes that are here, it reflects that need to have those changes in this document so that we are able to do our job properly. If we can move away from whether this document benefits Opposition or Government more, I think we will come up with a very good document that will in the end allow us to do our job better.

I support the changes in these amendments that we have come through.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Members of Parliament who have contributed to the motion on the Standing Orders which we have tabled in Parliament this morning and we are seeking to have it passage through tonight.

Mr. Speaker, it is interesting, I have never considered it to be of that meaning when I was reading through yesterday and today - the reference to the Standing Orders being a living document. Sir, just when I was hearing my colleagues in Parliament share their experience, I realise that it is actually a document that is designed to grow, change overtime as our collective experience and advancing Parliament changes with time.

So, I think some of the suggestions that have been suggested in this Parliament, the one that have been referred to in his speech by the honourable Alvick Maharaj, they were the same ones that have been referred to by the Opposition in 2014 to 2022 but you know, they did not do anything about it. We are doing something. The point that we wanted to make is this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we come half-way, they need to work the other half. That is the way Parliament is supposed to work.

In relations to the privilege, I thought that it was going to be mentioned by the honourable Tikoduadua being an ex-privileged Member, it provides for an opportunity and it is the sort of right environment that should be given. When someone is cited for privilege, this amendment actually gives

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- And the honourable Speaker.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- ... and of course the honourable Speaker.

These amendments actually provides the privileged Member an opportunity to speak to the allegation before the complaint is referred to the Privileges Committee.

It is an opportunity that was never there before. I am sure it is an opportunity as we had discussed also at the Committee level is, it provides the people of Fiji an opportunity for the person who has been privileged to be heard in open Parliament and to be heard by people who are going to be watching before everything else goes back and before it comes back to Parliament with recommendations.

So that is the sort of fairness that we were quite prepared as Government side to concede because we think that it is the most fairest thing to do. Of course, I want to take this opportunity, Mr. Speaker, to thank you for your guidance through the four meetings that has culminated in the adoption of what to be adopted amendments today. We thank you for your foresight and your timeless advice during the meetings in Committee.

Lastly, I wanted to say that now we are beginning to see shapes of the Standing Orders more into becoming the document that will ultimately and ultimately serve the interest of the people of Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote on the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of the sitting today and before I go further in adjourning Parliament, I would like to take this opportunity to thank each and every one of you, especially the honourable Prime Minister, in providing his vision as well by way of the support that he gave that enabled us to visit Australia. This is the Standing Orders Committee and in doing so, we are also encouraged by his support that some of the new provisions that we have now will allow us to do oversight and scrutiny and also more importantly how we are going to better utilise the services of the 12 Members of Parliament in the Opposition, who do not belong to any Standing Committee or to be a Member of any Standing Committee as there are only six.

However, we are grateful that through this hard work by the support from the honourable Prime Minister in allowing us to continue with that purpose, it has come to fruition now by seeing that is now part of the Standing Orders, and those Committees will be part of the sub-Committees of Standing Committees, and they can engage themselves in the work of the sub-Committees' Standing Committees, but when it comes to the vote, it is the substantive Standing Committees will be doing the vote.

So, this, honourable Members will only be heavily participating in all the work required by the terms of reference that is going to be provided for them to look in the scrutiny and oversight of the Bills. But, when it comes to the vote, it goes back to the substantive Standing Committee to make the vote. From that way, we protect the numbers from both from the Government and from the Opposition and also through the Standing Orders, you may find that we are very careful in the provision of the terms of reference to ensure we do not go beyond the perimeters of where we should be confining ourselves to in terms of scrutiny and oversight.

This is to allow the sub-Committee of Standing Committees to do their work but without intruding, trespassing or going beyond what we are supposed to confine ourselves to, but ensuring that we are mindful of the perimeters of existing Government policies and more importantly, the legislations. So those are the few things I wish to highlight, and I wish to thank each and every one of you.

The result of this has come about through our great work and like I said earlier on in some of our meetings, when we are seated in this august Parliament, I only look to each and every one of you who have taken the oath to be represented in this Parliament under the Constitution and simply equal in front of me, the Speaker, by being Members of Parliament. So, when we leave this august Parliament and go out, we are all Members of Parliament, and when we travel together, we should show solidarity there.

In some of our overseas trips, in coming back. the way the protocol officers of Parliament organise their trips by going, is no problem. We are all traveling as one, but into returning, some of us do not have any seats. They had suggested to me, if they can fly to Sydney and back to Fiji. I said no, "We travel as one, we come back as one." I think that is very important. Then, we will be projecting the image that we are all equal here - 55 Members of Parliament, period, no more, no less.

I thank the honourable Prime Minister, thank you the Government side and the Opposition side.

Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 8.29 p.m.