

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

TUESDAY, 9TH JULY, 2024

[CORRECTED COPY]

CONTENTS

	<u>Pages</u>
Minutes	1093
Communications from the Speaker	1093
(1) Welcome	
(2) Responses – Written Questions	
Debate on the 2024-2025 Appropriation Bill 2024	1094-1158
<u>List of Speakers</u>	<u>Page Nos.</u>
(1) Hon. V.T.T.K. Rayalu	(1094-1095)
(2) Hon. J. Saukuru	(1095-1097)
(3) Hon. I. Naivalurua	(1097-1101)
(4) Hon. A.D. Singh	(1101-1103)
(5) Hon. J.N. Nand	(1103-1106)
(6) Hon. C.J. Singh	(1107-1109)
(7) Hon. S. Nand	(1109-1112)
(8) Hon. L.D. Tabuya	(1112-1115)
(9) Hon. V. Nath	(1115-1118)
(10) Hon. P. Tikoduadua	(1118-1120)
(11) Hon. V. Naupoto	(1120-1122)
(12) Hon. S. Tubuna	(1122-1124)
(13) Hon. Ratu J.B. Niudamu	(1124-1127)
(14) Hon. Ro F.Q. Tuisawau	(1127-1130)
(15) Hon. V. Pillay	(1131-1133)
(16) Hon. Ratu I. Tuiwailevu	(1133-1135)
(17) Hon. P.K. Ravunawa	(1135-1138)
(18) Hon. T.N. Tunabuna	(1140-1142)
(19) Hon. T.R. Matasawalevu	(1142-1145)
(20) Hon. S.D. Turaga	(1145-1148)
(21) Hon. R.R. Sharma	(1148-1151)
(22) Hon. Ratu R.S.S. Vakalalabure	(1151-1153)
(23) Hon. A.N. Tuicolo	(1152-1154)
(24) Hon. I.S. Vanawalu	(1153-1155)
(25) Hon. N.T. Tuinaceva	(1155-1158)

TUESDAY, 9TH JULY, 2024

The Parliament met at 9.37 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Dr. Ratu A.R. Lalabalavu and honourable A.A. Maharaj.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Monday, 8th July, 2024, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting. I also welcome those joining us in the gallery and those watching the live proceedings on television and the internet. Thank you for your interest in this week's National Budget Debates.

Also, honourable Members I take this opportunity to welcome Mr. David Elder, a former Clerk to the Federal Parliament of Australia who had retired in 2019. He is currently doing consultancy work with the UNDP in reviewing the Parliament Support Programme. Welcome, Sir.

Responses - Written Questions

For the information of honourable Members, the Secretariat has received written responses from:

- (a) the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics to Written Question No. 54/2024 asked by the honourable Sanjay Kirpal and Written Question Nos. 74/2024 and 85/2024 asked by the honourable Premila Kumar; and
- (b) the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources to Written Question No. 96/2024 asked by the honourable Jone Usamate.

Honourable Members, the responses have been conveyed to the respective honourable Members and copies made available on the Parliamentary website.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE 2024-2025 APPROPRIATION BILL 2024

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU. - Mr. Speaker Sir, I rise to join other honourable Members of this august Parliament to add my voice to the Bill that is before Parliament. On this note, I wish to congratulate the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics for a well thought-out, balanced and visionary National Budget.

Mr. Speaker Sir, this Budget reflects innovation rather than business as usual.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- The importance of non-sugar crops contribution to the economy cannot be over-emphasized and the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways appreciates the budget of \$101.2 million, an increase of \$6 million. It is an indication of the Government's support towards resource-based sectors for growth and development in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, due to the lack of luxury of time, I will focus on some key initiatives that the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways will be focussing on over this financial year. But before I do that, I would just like to answer to some of the queries made by the honourable Premila Kumar regarding the utilization of funds. Rice, as she mentioned, our records show that we have a 90 percent utilisation rate.

For farm access roads, we are approaching 50 percent utilisation but let me make it clear to Parliament that building farm roads is not like making sandwiches; it is not that easy. You first must do the scoping where engineers have to do their normal scoping exercise then we have to deploy machines to areas that were previously neglected for so many years; untouched. Not even one of your Ministers visited those places.

(Laughter)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Do the job, stop complaining.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- We want to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we are building farm roads in areas that have never been touched before. These are areas that are farmed. When we opened up a farm road in Lovoni, there were a hundred thousand yaqona plants, so you can imagine the joy from those farmers when finally, they can load their *yaqona* in a four-wheel drive and get it down to the village.

The Ministry will be focusing on the following initiatives:

- (1) Empowerment through increasing income levels. The Ministry is in the process of the formation of farmer co-operatives for both crop and livestock producers. Let me just give an example. Currently, we are focusing on beef production to be reintroduced into the highlands of Navosa. I know my good friend, honourable Alipate Tuicolo is well aware because we talked about it here in Parliament before I went up to meet the beef producers in Navosa. The Navosa beef farming is a well-known story in Fiji agriculture. There used to be a beef farmer by the name of Mr. Masibalavu. He was so successful that he opened up a butcher in Sigatoka Town. Unfortunately, he went by himself. He was a one-man army, so in the end, he could not keep up with the supply and the business suffered. So, what we are encouraging the Navosa farmers now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to go together as a co-operative so that when it comes to supply for raw materials, in cases like the butcher by Mr. Masibalavu, they will not have to go through the same problem again.

- (2) The improvement of service delivery by raising efficiency level turnaround time. This has been a sore thumb in the Ministry since I joined, but we will see that the services are delivered on time. One of the cases in particular is the results for soil tests. We have been given two mobile soil laboratories by the Indian Government and the results can be produced for those who have given their soil samples within minutes.
- (3) The Ministry will be focusing on increasing the production base for both crops and livestock to achieve economies of scale. To this effect, we already have large scale production technology companies that are producing vegetables on a large scale, but we need more investors to invest on large scale production technologies for fruits and vegetables and also for intensive livestock production.
- (4) We will also be focusing on working with the private sector through the PPP recognising that the private sector is their engine of growth, and we will be working together with the private sector in the value addition area. I always say that, first of all let us forget about exporting what we produce, let us value add it. Get it into the taste buds of our people so that they start buying local products before we can even think about exporting.
- (5) Managing the adverse effects of climate change, disease control, soil salinity, flood protection and dredging. We are currently developing a National Waterways Strategy which will cover ridge to reef.

Actually, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the dredging of our main rivers really is a band-aid solution. What we need is a National Waterways Strategy that will outline from coastal protection works right up to the tributaries up in the mountains. It will be a multi-sectoral approach, we will be working together with the Minister for Fisheries and Forestry and also the Ministry of Lands and iTaukei Land Trust Board to fix the loss of soil from our rivers and streams. Having said that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the Budget before Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Looks like the honourable Maharaj is still away, probably beside the wife who is in labour. Honourable Maharaj is not in labour, it is the wife. We will try and accommodate him when he is available.

(Laughter)

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, it gives me great pleasure to respond to the 2024-2025 National Budget tabled by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance. I share similar sentiments with those honourable Members who have earlier shared their responses in expressing my unwavering support for the recent Budget Announcement for the new Financial Year. As the Minister for Youth and Sports, I would like to commend the Coalition Government's unwavering dedication to the development of youth and sports in our beloved nation.

Mr. Speaker, the 20 percent increase in the Ministry of Youth and Sports' budget for the next financial year is a significant boost and underscores the Government's unwavering commitment to the development of our youth and the advancement of sports in our nation. The increased budget allocation is a clear testament to the Government's recognition of the pivotal role that youth and sports play in our society. It demonstrates a commitment to fostering an environment where our young people can thrive, develop their skills and contribute positively to our nation's progress. This financial support will enable us to implement a range of initiatives designed to empower the youth,

enhance their capacities and promote sports development at all levels.

Mr. Speaker, youth development is a cornerstone of our national progress. The future of our nations hinges on the capabilities, skills and empowerment of our young people. Our Ministry is dedicated to ensuring that every young person has the opportunity to realise their potential and contribute meaningfully to society. This involves multifaceted approach, encompassing capacity building programmes, skills training, youth empowerment and targeted initiatives at our Youth Training Centres.

Mr. Speaker, we have approximately 925,000 people residing in our beautiful country, and a significant one-third of this population consists of youth aged between 15 years to 35 years old. It is evident that investing in their future is paramount to overall growth and development of our nation.

In that regard, this budget provides the Ministry with \$650,000 to support our youth capacity building programmes, noting its importance for preparing our youth to meet the challenges of the future. Through various programmes, we aim to equip young people with the knowledge, skills and competencies necessary for personal and professional success. These programmes focus on leadership development, empowerment, entrepreneurship and community engagement, providing youth with the tools they need to become proactive and responsible citizens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, skills training is a critical component of our youth capacity building development strategy. In a rapidly changing global economy, it is imperative that our youth possess the skills required to compete and succeed.

We have established training centres across the country that offer a wide range of vocational and technical training programmes. These centres serve as hubs for our youth development, offering tailored programmes that cater for the unique challenges and opportunities in each region. By providing access to education, training and resources, our centres are helping through a second chance to education, ensuring that all young people have the opportunity to be successful. A further \$687,600 has been allocated to ensure the proper maintenance of our Youth Training Centres and strengthen the delivery of its programmes.

Mr. Speaker, as we look to the future and also consider the current issues facing our young people today, we recognise the importance of instilling positive values and life skills in our young people from an early age. To this end, we are committed to strengthening the Scouts and Girl Guides Programmes in our primary schools. These programmes provide young children with the opportunity to develop essential life skills, such as teamwork, leadership and problem-solving, in a fun and supportive environment. The budget support we have received will enable us to expand these programmes, reaching out to more young people and laying the foundation for their future success.

Mr. Speaker, with these students transitioning to secondary school level, the Ministry is proud to deliver the Duke of Edinburg Awards Programme and a budget of \$32,000 has been allocated to support this initiative. This internationally recognised initiative encourages young people to engage in a variety of challenging and rewarding activities, fostering personal development and community involvement. By participating in the Duke of Edinburgh Awards, our youth are able to develop valuable skills, build resilience and gain a sense of achievement. The increased budget allocation will allow us to enhance and expand this Programme, ensuring that more young people can benefit from its positive impact.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, Sir, sports development is a key priority for our Ministry and it accounts for 72 percent of our budget. This significant investment reflects the importance of sports in promoting physical health, social cohesion, and serves as a platform for our youth to showcase

their talents, build teamwork and develop a strong sense of discipline and dedication. It is also a major contributor to Fiji's economy through sports tourism, generating remittances from overseas athletes, creating jobs and fostering national pride through international competitions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our efforts to strengthen sports development, we have proposed a comprehensive review of the Fiji National Sports Commission. This review is aimed at ensuring that the Commission is effectively fulfilling its mandate and is well-positioned to support the growth and development of sports in our nation. A budget of \$50,000 has been provided to support this review, enabling us to access the Commission's performance, identify areas for improvement and implement necessary changes to enhance its effectiveness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our focus on sports development begins at the grassroots level. We are committed to providing young people with access to sports programmes and facilities in their communities. Through partnerships with schools, local clubs and community organisations, we are working to ensure that all young people have the opportunity to participate in sports.

Mr Speaker, Sir, in addition to grassroots programmes, we are also dedicated to supporting our elite athletes. The increased budget will allow us to enhance our support for high-performance sports, providing our athletes with the resources, training and support they need to compete at the highest levels. This includes funding for training camps, coaches, international competitions and sports science programmes, ensuring that our athletes are well-prepared to represent our nation on the global stage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, infrastructure development is another critical aspect of our sports strategy. We are investing in the construction and upgrade of sports facilities across the country, ensuring that our sports loving people and athletes have access to training and competition venues. This includes the development of multi-purpose hardcourts, upgrading existing facilities, including sports grounds in underserved areas. A budget of \$995,581 has been allocated to cater for this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, promoting community engagement and participation in sports is essential for building a healthy and active society. We are implementing a range of initiatives designed to encourage people of all ages to get involved in sports and physical activities. This includes community sports festivals, fitness programmes and awareness campaigns aimed at promoting the benefits of an active lifestyle.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increased budgetary allocation for the Ministry of Youth and Sports represents a significant investment in the future of our nation. It is a clear demonstration of the Government's commitment to youth development and sports, and it provides us with the resources needed to implement a wide range of initiatives that will have a lasting impact on our young people and our society as a whole.

I would like to, once again, thank the Government for their unwavering support and for recognising the importance of investing in our youth and sports. Together, we can build a brighter future for our nation, one that is driven by energy, talent and potential of our young people.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and fellow Fijian who are listening and watching; thank you for this opportunity to respond to the proposed 2024-2025 Budget delivered by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics on Friday, 28th June, 2024. The theme of the Budget is "*Economically Stable, Secure and Sustainable Fiji*".

Mr. Speaker, Sir, first, I would like to congratulate and welcome honourable Graham Leung and wish him well in his tenure as the Attorney-General. I look forward to the contributions and balance he will bring to this august Parliament. I support the honourable Attorney-General's proposed initiatives on the Information Act and the Code of Conduct Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also congratulate and welcome honourable Alitia Bainivalu's appointment as the Minister for Fisheries and Forestry. I look forward to her leadership and contribution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the social and economic realities in which this Budget has been delivered are of serious concerns to all Fijians. This Budget has been described as a work in progress and holds the aspirations of many.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government has the task of creating and supporting the initiatives that align with His Excellency the President's intentions, identified in his Opening Address on 4th March, 2024 to this Parliament where His Excellency stated, and I quote, "to provide inclusive development that enhances the wellbeing of all our people".

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as an independent Member of this august Parliament and privileged to sit on the cross benches, I acknowledge the central place the Budget takes in delivering the Coalition Government's agenda.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I applaud the resolution of the outstanding issues regarding the Vatukoula Mine workers. I thank the honourable Minister for Justice for completing the Fiji Corrections' overdue Job Evaluation Exercise (JEE), which allows for the correct alignment of salary and an increase in the number of positions within the Fiji Corrections Service.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I value the pay increases for our hardworking civil servants, the adjustments to FNPF pensions, ongoing support for welfare recipients, the new funding to establish the Narcotics Bureau and the efforts towards a National Housing Plan. These initiatives indicate that in some portfolios, the Coalition has a heart that is listening and moving.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish this list of likes would be longer. However, I must turn and address the concerns that have emerged from scrutinising the Budget. I wish to cover four areas only, the:

- (1) Fiji Police Force;
- (2) Fiji Corrections Service;
- (3) Ministry of Youth and Sports; and
- (4) 25 percent tax on NGOs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, hidden in the details is a decision to tax the property income of non-profit organisations. There appears to be a need for more consultations with the stakeholders, as they are left wondering about the impact on the delivery of critical services and essential support. Our non-profit sector contributes significantly to our society, meeting a wide range of social, disaster relief, livelihood and empowerment needs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me illustrate the impact of this tax on one of our most respected charities that support the poor across our nation. The Housing Assistance Relief Trust (HART) has faithfully served Fjii since 1970 and operates in 19 communities, one nursing home, four kindergartens and one primary school. The HART tenants are provided accommodation at a very low rent to help them get back on their feet. This rental income supports the daily operational expenses of HART, but it appears from this Budget that this income will now be taxed at 25 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is an injustice as it applies to HART and other organisations, whose mandate is to support our needy children, families, and the vulnerable in our communities.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. I NAIVALURUA.- To further the pressure, HART, in consultation with the Ministry of Housing, requested \$1 million to undertake necessary upgrades to their housing stock in Suva. This request has been reduced to \$400,000 only, and they now find themselves short in this budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, in his Budget Address to this august Parliament, stated, “We need to get the basics right”, and then said, “we need to protect our vulnerable, the elderly and people with disabilities”. If this was his and this Coalition Government’s intention, how does he explain the imposition of a new tax on the groups who consistently support much of the good and charitable work the Government cannot fund or undertake? Mr. Speaker, Sir, I request the honourable Deputy Prime Minister to reconsider his budget decision.

On the Fiji Police Force, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I applaud the Government for recognising the importance of the Fiji Police Force as the custodians of law and order and their role in combating the challenges of the 21st century. The budget has a significant increase of over \$41 million which is commendable, however, the Police reset should not be dependent on external leadership as we have capable and competent leaders within the Fiji Police Force.

While we value close and keen cooperation with our Australian partners, the days of dependency are long gone, and we must learn to build our own capability and integrity with confidence. Fiji can achieve sustainable and impactful policing reforms that resonate with its people and values.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I refer to the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration’s statement on 7th June, 2024, in which he revealed that the Fiji Police Force requires a generational change, which will be achieved by resetting the core values. The honourable Minister seems to have misunderstood that the current core values are valid, and officers are strongly determined to serve the nation diligently. Outsourcing mentoring for the Commissioner of Police undermines the potential for local leadership to set and uphold ethical standards rooted in Fiji’s own cultural and societal context.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Police Force has come a long way. What is needed within the Force is good leadership developed through a good succession plan. I beg to differ with a widespread notion that the Fiji Police Force is in disarray. What is always needed at the head of the Fiji Police is a leader who is trustworthy, fears God, has a solid ethic and hates dishonest gains.

The current bilateral and regional arrangements are functional and sufficient for partnership and development needs. The Fiji Police Force should not sell the heart and soul of what it is today, nor sell out its future.

The Fiji Corrections Service, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a frontline agency in the fight against crime through its rehabilitation focus and approach. Fiji Corrections Service operates several business enterprises that are a core function of the rehabilitation process for inmates.

The suspension of the Trade and Manufacturing Accounts (TMAs) has seriously affected Fiji Corrections Service. I urge the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics to work with the honourable Minister for

Justice and consider reactivating the TMA accounts. This is an essential part of revenue generation for the organisation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while I commend the Coalition Government for resolving the long outstanding Job Evaluation Exercise (JEE) and the additional 81 posts, as a frontline agency in the fight against crime, the reduction in capital allocation for Fiji Corrections Service is disappointing. We know that the remand facilities are always overcrowded, as this is where much of the underlying drug and crime crisis in our nation ends up.

On Drugs and Counter Narcotics Strategy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, continuing with the drugs issues facing our communities, the honourable Prime Minister has identified this as a national crisis, with the honourable Minister for Justice Minister declaring that the fate of Fiji is at a crossroad in *The Fiji Times* of 26th June, 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while I applaud the efforts of the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration in establishing a Narcotics Bureau, from what I hear on the ground, the situation has overtaken us. Drugs are easily and readily available on our streets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I ask the Coalition Government, does our effort match the crisis? In scrutinizing this Budget, our words appear empty as much of the Counter Narcotics Strategy 2023 still needs to be funded in the various ministries identified as stakeholders. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the launch of the Counter Narcotics Strategy is a positive step forward, however, I ask the following questions:

- (1) Will the strategies in this document effectively disrupt the flow and use of drugs?
- (2) Does this send a clear signal to the syndicates seeking to exploit our borders and our people?
- (3) Does this create a national conscience that everyone must stand and fight this together?
- (4) Does this return Fiji to a safe and stable nation?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the battle against drugs requires a vigorous and immediate response, not a bureaucratic one. The actions taken must be proactive and precise. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I further suggest the establishment of a Joint Select Committee for Parliamentary Oversight to review and assess the strategy's implementation and progress.

On Youth and Sports, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the Ministry of Youth and Sports' budget allocation. On a previous occasion, I suggested to Parliament that youth and sports could be separated to improve the youth focused outcomes. I state this again to my esteemed colleagues this morning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, separating the Ministry of Youth and Sports is important for Fiji because Youth and Sports have distinct needs and priorities. By having separate ministries, youth and sports can receive focused attention and resources, leading to more effective policies and programmes tailored to their specific requirements. This separation ensures that each sector's unique challenges and opportunities are adequately addressed.

Sports has the potential as both an industry and a foreign relations asset. Youth are our future and deserve our focused attention and investment. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our effort to improve the efficiency of the Government structure and organisation, I strongly recommend to the honourable Prime Minister that the Coalition Government seriously consider the separation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this point, I also express my best wishes to our Fijian athletes preparing for the Olympics in Paris. I extend a special cheer to our Fiji Sevens Team (men and women) –

“Gold Fiji Gold” not “Go Fiji Go” and look forward to our national celebrations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in closing, I offer my support because I believe the Budget aims to create the right environment and establish a firm base to achieve its intended theme. However, the best litmus test to prove this would be a mid-term review.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the past few weeks had been a very turbulent and uncertain time for some of us in this Parliament. I want to acknowledge your experience, wisdom and guidance in having the foresight to retain the services of the 16 Members of Parliament.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, viewers and listeners, *bula vinaka* and good morning. I rise in support of the 2024-2025 National Budget delivered by the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for Finance. on 28th June, 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the honourable Minister and his hardworking team for presenting a well-structured and balanced Budget that aligns with the Government’s goals. Realising the theme of the Budget, an economically stable, secure and sustainable Fiji. It defines what is needed right now to improve the fundamentals of our economy. It is a priority-based Budget aimed at meeting challenges, reducing huge Government debt, sustaining growth and enhancing resilience against future economic shocks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget aligns with our national commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the Budget narrative also supports my Ministry’s strategic priorities on meeting national and international obligations through SDG 8, which is, to foster, sustain, inclusive, sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. My Ministry’s vision of decent work and sustainable employment for all derives from SDG8 is closely aligned with the Budget. The theme to promote decent work opportunities ensure safe and healthy workplaces, ensure productivity and continue to encourage good faith employment relations and enhance social justice in Fiji for economic stability and sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, decent work provides citizens with stable well-paid jobs improving living standards and economic security, fostering stability in society. This will help build a truly inclusive and sustainable Fiji where economic prosperity is shared equitably. The Ministry has been allocated a total of \$21.3 million for the next financial year, more than double the current budget. We are thankful to the Government for this increase. Let me outline some key initiatives supported by the Budget.

On the National Employment Centre, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we thank and acknowledge Australia and New Zealand’s support through the *Vuvale* and *Duavata* initiatives. Selected low skilled and unemployed Fijian workers under the PALM Scheme now can take their families to Australia through the Family Accompaniment Pilot Programme from August 2024, fostering stronger connections and addressing social impact of long family separations. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry’s employment reform will continue to significantly contribute to increasing in remittance and improve living standards of Fijians under the scheme.

On Workmen’s Compensation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has been allocated \$6 million for No Fault Compensation Scheme to facilitate employment and school accidents. The Ministry has taken over the processing of cases from Veritas Pte Limited starting from 1st June, 2024, following a decision by the Interim ACCF Board. Veritas Pte Limited managed ACCF from 2019 to 2023, charging \$75,000 monthly and \$900,000 annually. The Government will be able to save

approximately \$1.8 million annually with the transfer of the Workmen's Compensation's functions back to the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in alignment with the Government's review on the Ease of Doing Business, led by the Ministry of Trade, my Ministry has reviewed the effectiveness of the general workplace inspections and audits as per the World Bank Report of August 2023 to strengthen risk-based inspections and audit provisions. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 24 OHS technical staff have been assigned to implement the amended regulations focusing on high-risk workplaces and promoting pro-active safety measures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government has raised the minimum wage rate from \$4 to \$4.50 per hour from 1st August, 2024 and \$5 from 1st April, 2025. It took the previous government five years to increase the minimum wage rate from \$2.68 to \$4. Our Government has taken two years to increase it by 25 percent. I know the facts hurts you.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 10 sectoral wages will also be increased by the same amount. So, all workers will have their increases in due course. Mr. Speaker, Sir, increasing minimum wage, improve living standards and productivity contributes to a better nation for all.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Shame!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Shame on you for doing what you did for the last 17 years.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, additional allocation has been made to ensure compliance.

The civil servants had been given a 7 percent to 20 percent increase which is unprecedented without any Job Evaluation Exercise (JEE), Sir.

In the past, Sir, 2 percent to 3 percent will be given without a JEE, and let me clarify that. Whenever there was a JEE there would be a higher increase. Now, alluding to honourable Hem Chand's statement on the civil servants' salary, Sir, the 2017 JEE which boast of a 14 percent average actually raised from 3 percent to 14 percent. The lowest was around 3 percent. Mr. Speaker, Sir, 80 percent of the teachers received below 15 percent and the 20 percent who received above 15 percent lost their positions because they were re-advertised.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is the truth.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to reiterate that this Government is truly a government for the people.

The Vatukoula strike settlement, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is one of the key highlights of the new Budget. I wish to laud the commitment of the Coalition Government which accomplished this through the efforts of my Ministry. Today we have meaningfully touched the lives of 368 families

in Vatukoula who were affected by the 1991 strike.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the National Secretary of FTUC, Mr. Felix Anthony for assisting with the negotiations. We all are aware that they will be paid \$10,000 in the coming Budget and then \$10,000 the following year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have also activated the outstanding case of Master Tevita Koroi, the former President of FTA who was terminated without course by the previous government. This is littered with the history of the previous government. Many people lost their jobs because they were terminated for speaking up like, Mr. Tevita Koroi for his members. This was reported to ILO and now we are settling the matter.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, tripartism has been restored and ERAB is now reviewing the labour laws. The direct contact mission from ILO was overdue since 2019 has visited us in April and has given us a sound report. They were very happy with the progress we made in the last 18 months, and I am also happy to report, Sir, that we are now off the blacklist of ILO that was there over a decade.

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

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, our mediation team has been able to sort out 80 percent of the mediated cases that were referred to them with good-faith negotiations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Permanent Secretary has now taken over the Chair of the Asian Productivity Organization (APO) and we are going to host the APO meeting in October 2024. This is going to help us with education and training.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to congratulate and thank my Permanent Secretary and the entire team for winning the four awards at the Civil Service Week, as well as the overall award for best delivery during the Civil Service Week. I thank you for the opportunity, Sir and I fully support the Budget.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, viewers and listeners, I rise to provide my response on the 2024-2025 Fiji National Budget. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to first focus on certain key aspects of the Budget.

Economic diversification, recognising the vulnerabilities associated with dependence on tourism and agriculture, the budget tries to navigate its efforts to diversify the economy. However, it falls short of providing incentives for expanding industries like manufacturing, information technology, renewable energy and services.

Social welfare enhancements, the budget must have more than enough potential to prioritise social welfare programmes aimed at improving the wellbeing of the vulnerable population. This includes increased funding for social security, healthcare services and assistance programme for low income households.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, social safety nets should be strengthened to reduce poverty, improve health outcomes and promote social cohesion contributing to overall societal stability and resilience.

Transparency accountability, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2024-2025 National Budget process must emphasise transparency and accountability in financial management. Measures such as public reporting of budget allocation, fiscal audits and oversight mechanisms contribute to ensuring that

funds are used efficiently and effectively.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope FijiFirst legacy of transparent governance practices will be maintained to build trust amongst citizens, investors and international stakeholders fostering a conducive environment for economic growth and development.

In a nutshell, the 2024-2025 Fiji National Budget demonstrates the lack of depth and strength in strategic infrastructure investment, economic diversification, education and human capital development, social welfare enhancements, environmental sustainability initiatives and transparent financial management. In order to promote inclusive growth, improving quality of life and positioning Fiji for sustainable development in the coming fiscal year, the government must ensure that a wider participation is needed from all sectors, something which is lacking at the moment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget has many loopholes and I hope it is taken on board very positively so that the Government is held accountable, and shortfalls are adequately addressed in future budgets.

Limited revenue diversification, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the primary weaknesses of the 2024-2025 Fiji National Budget is its reliance on limited sources of revenue. Fiji heavily depends on tourism and agriculture, which are vulnerable to external shocks such as natural disasters, global economic downturns or pandemics.

Mr. Speaker Sir, a lack of diversification in revenue streams will certainly hinder the Government's ability to adequately fund its budgetary priorities during times of economic instability or sector-specific crises.

Fiscal Deficit and Debt Sustainability is another concern. The budget includes ambitious spending plans without corresponding revenue increases or efficient expenditure management. It will certainly lead to widening fiscal deficits and increased public debt. The high levels of public debt will no doubt constrain future budgetary flexibility, limit the government's ability to invest in critical infrastructure and social programmes and potentially lead to economic instability.

Inadequate Social Welfare Spending, despite likely allocations for social welfare programmes, there are weaknesses in the adequacy and distribution of funds. Challenges such as bureaucratic inefficiencies, inadequate targeting mechanisms will result in funds not reaching the intended beneficiaries effectively. This will give rise to socio-economic inequalities and undermine the government's effort to alleviate poverty and improve living standards for the vulnerable population, and in the last two years, we have seen some aspects of this.

Infrastructure and Project Implementation Delays: While investments in infrastructure are crucial for economic development, weaknesses in project implementation and management could hinder the budget's effectiveness.

Issues such as delays in project execution, cost overruns and poor quality of infrastructure could result from inadequate planning, capacity constraints, or governance challenges. Such inefficiencies can diminish the expected benefits of infrastructure investments and delay economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there has not been a major announcement of new major projects. I am inclined to say that under this Government, there will be no infrastructure revolution as anticipated by the people.

It is very sad to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that very soon, the infrastructure pipeline left by the FijiFirst Government will dry up and, without doubt, infrastructure investment will fall off a cliff and take a tumble.

Environment Sustainability Concerns: Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite its urgency for environmental conservation and climate change adaptation, weaknesses in enforcement, regulation and policy implementation could undermine sustainability efforts. Fiji faces significant environmental challenges, including biodiversity loss, deforestation and vulnerability to climate change impacts, like rising sea levels and extreme weather events. Inadequate funding, weak governance frameworks and lack of coordination among stakeholders is limiting the effectiveness of environmental initiatives as outlined in the Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the 2024-2025 Fiji National Budget may prioritise key sectors such as infrastructure, social welfare, education, and environmental sustainability. It will face significant weaknesses in revenue diversification, fiscal management, social welfare spending adequacy, infrastructure project implementation, et cetera. I urge and plead with the Government to be more vigilant in the way the funds are disbursed and how the monitoring is done so that intended outcome is achieved.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note and welcome the increase in the Ministry of Agriculture's budget by \$6 million to a total of \$102.2 million. This will hugely benefit our farmers as they will get more initiatives and funding.

At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wholeheartedly wish to thank the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways and the Assistant Minister for Agriculture in addressing my concern for stray cattles in the Sigatoka area that was an eyesore, causing huge damages to crops and also being one of the contributing factors for road accidents.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, both the Ministers, with the able support from the Sigatoka Police and staff of the Ministry of Agriculture in Sigatoka and the Western Division, spearheaded a very effective campaign to impound stray animals and cattle. We now feel safe while driving around Sigatoka and the Queens Highway, and farmers are able to maintain and attend to their subsistence vegetable and crop farming that were previously ransacked by stray cattles.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the other hand, it is an eyesore to see land whose leases had expired and which landowners acquired still not being utilised to their full potential. More funds must be allocated for land utilisation and Government to open up those land so that local investors can access them and move towards commercial agriculture.

If those land are opened up for local investors, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pretty sure more potential farmers can engage which will help boost our food security. All we need is more funding and developing a model of Agricultural Development for our nation. I urge the Ministry of Agriculture to work on this, and I am sure that one day this will come into fruition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget clearly confirms that the Coalition Government has no ridged plans to address the cost of living that is skyrocketing day by day. Despite great anticipation, this is yet another budget that does not offer much to mitigate the increasing and new cost of living.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it seems that the Government has lost a sense of control of its finances. On a more worrying note, this Budget threatens our economic security, and one may say that it is delivering more deficit and so more debt. The cost of groceries has gone up. Rent and interest repayments are up too. Unable to maintain its financial competence, this Government is borrowing

more and generating less.

On a different note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what boggles my mind is that despite free education, free medical, subsidies on water and electricity, assistance for first home buyers, et cetera, why do our citizens still leave our shores and end up paying handsomely for education, water, electricity, health schemes, et cetera, elsewhere? I urge the Government to find the reasons and in the interest of our nation, try fixing this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget lets the majority of the people down. It is not so good Budget, and the Government is to be blamed. A Budget with a lot of ideas but no vision, it has targets but no plans. It plans to generate revenue but less is allocated to the new cost of living support. None of its ribbon cutting on Coalition projects, formerly FijiFirst, can disguise the Government's inability to mitigate the high cost of living. The people of Fiji deserve much better. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for giving me this opportunity.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you honourable Joseph Nand for your response. You attracted a lot of flak as well.

(Laughter)

Honourable Members, I intend to adjourn Parliament now for morning tea.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.40 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.21 a.m.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; a very good morning to you all, *bula vinaka*, *sat sri akaal* and *namaste* to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver my response to the 204-2025 National Budget. I would like to begin by expressing my heartfelt commendation to the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics for his exemplary efforts in preparing a Budget that promises an immediate and much-needed increase in income, thereby, enhancing the quality of life for our beloved citizens.

As articulated by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, this Budget represents the beginning of our journey to rectify the missteps of the past. Rest assured; we are resolute in our commitment to steering the course towards correcting the historical wrongs and its legacies.

Our goal is to elevate income levels and ensure that essential services such as healthcare, education and infrastructure meet and exceed acceptable standards.

The wheels of change have been set in motion with remarkable speed over the last 18 months, and we are determined to maintain this momentum and driving forward with unwavering dedication and purpose.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I speak on my Ministry's budget, I would like to thank the honourable Prime Minister and all my colleagues - Cabinet Ministers and honourable Opposition Members who, whenever I approach them for their assistance in the Sugar Industry, they have come up and assisted me with my request. I would also like to thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for his support towards the sugar industry, as mentioned in his deliberation yesterday. Thank you very much.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will now speak on the budget provided to the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry. The Sugar Industry will benefit significantly from this budget with an allocation of \$70.1 million. We had requested this fund to continue with our 13 initiatives introduced in 2023-2024 Budget, and we are pleased to have secured funding for all the essential projects.

The primary concern for any cane farmer, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has always been the amount they receive for their cane payment. As highlighted by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance in his Budget Speech, we made a historic \$91.38 per tonne last year and we have paid \$101.08 per tonne for this year.

Despite the ongoing favourable cane prices, I am grateful that the Government has allocated \$4 million for the sugar price stabilization budget. This decision underscores our unwavering commitment to ensuring our farmers receive their due and are not short-changed, as they were done by the previous regime.

To address farm productivity and increase overall sugar production, we are providing budget support under the Sugarcane Development and Farmers Assistance Programme of \$4 million, which funds sugarcane planting and replanting will continue. Additionally, the Farm Incentive Programme of \$1 million will provide \$5 for every tonne of cane increased from the 2023 season in comparison to the 2024 season. The farmers will be paid extra \$5 per tonne.

To tackle transportation issues, the Ministry will provide services to the farmers through the

Cane Access Roads Programme of \$4 million, ensuring the temporary repair of over 3,000 roads, culverts and crossings, as needed to facilitate cane transportation to the mills.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has, once again, allocated \$1 million for the provision of cane cage-bins. We expect to fabricate over 40 cage-bins, enabling the transfer of mechanically harvested cane via the rail network, which is the cheapest mode of transportation of cane.

Addressing labour shortages which have affected many of our sectors, we aim to mechanise the industry through the Sugarcane Farm Mechanization Programme with a \$500,000 budgetary allocation. Furthermore, we will increase support to our farmers who harvest their cane using manual labour by providing a subsidy of \$3 per tonne which was previously \$1 per tonne. Meanwhile, we have continuously engaged the Fiji Corrections Service and their inmates for manual cane harvesting, with an allocation of \$320,000 set aside for this project.

To ensure the cost of inputs is manageable, the Ministry will continue with the Fertilizer Subsidy Programme of \$20 million, where farmers will pay only \$20 per bag of fertilizer. We will also subsidize weedicide costs of \$1 million and subsidize cartage costs of \$4.9 million for the Penang farmers.

To address land lease issues, the Government has set aside \$1 million to assist growers, whose leases are expiring or who wish to purchase land for cane farming by providing a subsidy of 30 percent or \$7,500, whichever is lower.

To mitigate the impacts of climate change, the Ministry will continue with the Drainage for sugarcane farms of \$5.5 million, aiming to reduce the effects of flooding during the offseason.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to continuing these vital programmes, the Government has allocated \$15 million as working capital support for the Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC) in this budget. This allocation ensures that FSC can meet its payment obligations for the EXIM Bank loan.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me reiterate that the project undertaken with this loan was one of the many failures under the previous regimes. We are now compelled to bail FSC out through this provision, a necessary measure to rectify the past missteps and stabilize the sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs is allocated \$6 million. This was disbanded by the previous government. There is a lot of work that needs to be done and there is a report that has been made by Dr. Rajen Prasad and Mr. Radhe Nand, which will be tabled in Cabinet for the adoption of the report and implementation after.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry's re-establishment marks a significant milestone in Fiji's history as it offers a fresh approach to enhancing relationships amongst our diverse ethnic communities in Fiji. This initiative presents an opportunity to promote the development of a dynamic, prosperous and a socially cohesive Fiji society, a society where all Fijians are proud of their identity and heritage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are other projects that we have in hand. However, just a quick one, in addition, the Ministry has undertaken most of the preliminary work in relation to the development of a gas crematorium at Tuatua, Labasa, while work on other gas crematoriums are in progress, notably at Varoko Cemetery in Ba, Lovu Cemetery in Lautoka and Raiwaqa Cemetery in Navua.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will reinvigorate its efforts in reaching out to the communities through active engagements, advocacy, participation in cultural events and collaborating with community-based organisations by supporting community-based programmes, such as renovation of religious places, extension and upgrade of existing multi-ethnic infrastructure and support to language, culture and arts programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those words, I would like to say that I fully support the Budget before us.

MR. SPEAKER.- We hope other ethnic groups will also be able to access that crematorium.

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers and honourable Members of this august Parliament; I rise to respond to the 2024-2025 National Budget that was delivered by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I acknowledge the sentiments raised by the honourable Leader of the Opposition and I fully agree with it. The people of Fiji have mixed feelings about the 2024-2025 Budget and that is the bitter truth about this Budget. I praise some of the initiatives taken by the Government, and that too, with a pinch of salt.

The increase in civil servants' pay is welcome. However, why is the disparity between grades and bands? All civil servants are an integral part of the Civil Service, and these are the people who keep the Civil Service running. The increment should have been uniform as all work equally hard, or is the honourable Minister for Finance of the view that some are more important than the others?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government is finally coming partially true to their words of increasing the minimum wage. However, my question is, why \$4.50 from 1st August and \$5 from April 2025? On what basis have they come to this rate? Is it based on a minimum wage review? If it is true, where is the report? Why has the report not been made public? The staggered increase has not gone down well with the wage earners. They were expecting better from this Government.

I am sure the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics understands the concept of time value of money. It states that the value of a dollar today is more than the value of a dollar tomorrow. Therefore, I urge the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, if you really want to give a minimum wage of \$5 to the people, then give it now rather than nine months down the line. Do not drip feed them. By the way, let me remind you that it was the FijiFirst Government that brought in the minimum wage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must thank the Government for the reinstatement of the FNPF pension payments. This has been requested by our people for a long time and finally, it has happened. Thank you.

It is good to see that finally, the issue of Vatukoula mine workers strike has been settled. I wish all the beneficiaries of the settlement well, and with the Government's help, I hope they can move on.

The conversion of bus fare assistance to cash top-up in the social pension scheme cannot go unappreciated. I have heard a lot of appreciation from the people, and I wish to convey this to the Government.

Mr. Speaker Sir, all is not well with the 2024-2025 Budget. The Budget falls short of addressing investment and growth in Fiji. There is nothing new that encourages local investment in the country. Banks are complaining of high liquidity as people are not borrowing to invest. Even when loans are approved, people are not drawing to invest. Also, I fail to see anything in the Budget that attracts foreign investment in Fiji. This is not good as Fiji needs foreign investments to grow the economy. When the economy booms, people's trust and confidence in the government increases. I urge the honourable Minister for Finance to work on this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, until November 2022, the only thing the honourable Minister for Finance talked about was *dinau* or the nominal debt or debt per capita. This was very much missing from his speech and he took an about-turn and started talking debt-to-GDP ratio. I am sure the people of Fiji would like to know the expected debt level in the 2024-2025 Budget. It is \$10.9 billion, and it translates to per capita debt of \$12,000 to \$12,800.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- What have you done?

HON. S. NAND.- In the honourable Minister for Finance's language, every citizen carries a debt of \$12,000 to \$12,800 depending on the actual population. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe that an allocation of \$2 million to establish the Narcotics Bureau is far too little to fight a multibillion-dollar problem. I believe we are investing too little to fight a problem that is overarching on all other issues.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Hear, hear!

HON. S. NAND.- I urge the honourable Minister for Finance to increase this allocation.

Direct Infrastructure Development is completely missing from this budget. Allocation is only for continued maintenance of infrastructure already developed by the previous government. My question is, what new roads are being done? The answer is none. The Government is relying too much on direct budget support from donor agencies. The Government should remember that this is not a permanent facility that will always be available, this can be withdrawn if the economic conditions in these countries are not favourable. We should start focusing on having a budget without this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the Government aware of GDP contribution for each sector? This should be considered when allocating resources and prioritizing engagement in these sectors. The agriculture and aquaculture sector will be contributing close to \$946 million towards the GDP in 2024. Every second or third investment we hear is in the tourism sector. We fail to encourage either foreign or local investment in the agricultural sector.

Just yesterday the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism stated that when the tourism sector does well, the other sectors do well also. Great, but you also mentioned that this year tourism will be contributing 40 percent to the GDP. Who is he trying to fool? This year tourism's contribution to GDP will be \$2.5 billion with a total GDP of the country at \$11 billion. It equates to only 22 percent, do not mislead the population, do not try to oversell the tourism industry. However, considering that, we will import \$1.2 billion in food alone in 2024. Why is there so little development or investment in the agriculture sector to negate these imports?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Good question, what did you do ?

HON. S. NAND.- We should not lose focus that Fiji is an agricultural country, Fiji was an agricultural country and Fiji will be an agricultural country.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- What did you do for 16 years?

HON. S. NAND.- Agriculture is a sector that keeps the country ticking. Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me give you some interesting facts about tourism. According to RBF, pre-booking for the next 90 days has decreased by 8 percent. Our hotels are outpricing themselves out of the market. This will affect the returning visitors as people may opt for cheaper Asian markets where the sun, sand and beaches are the same. Increase in departure tax puts a further burden on the tourists.

Agriculture sector engages majority of the citizens of Fiji and the sector demands the Government's unwavering attention. During the COVID pandemic, the borders closed, tourists stopped coming to Fiji, other manufacturing sectors either downsized or closed but the farmers continued to farm and continued to feed the nation. Had it not been for the farmers, we would have had some serious problems. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am grateful for an allocation of \$101.2 million in the agriculture sector. There has been an increase in crop extension from \$17.3 million to \$18.5 million. Thank you so much for providing this increase but it is not enough.

Mr. Speaker, why are the vegetable farmers left out of the commodity focus and assistance? The only assistance allocated to them is the fertilizer and weedicide subsidy. Does the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance realize that this sector is vital for Fiji and needs the assistance for land preparation, seeds, agronomic practices and supply chain management? All vegetable farmers work equally hard to farm and get the produce to the market. Why is a holistic approach not taken to provide assistance to the vegetable farmers? Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not see why a farmer in Labasa or Bua should get a lower price for a bundle of bean than a farmer in Nausori? The only thing that hinders them from getting the optimum price is market access.

I would be pleased to see a collaborated effort between the Ministry of Agriculture and the Agricultural Marketing Authority (AMA) to establish a supply chain including cold storage to enable farmers to get better market access and ensure quality produce is available to the consumers. Assisting our farmers in growing quality produce and assisting them with supply chain management can also reduce imports. These farmers can supply to the hotels and resorts which heavily rely on imported produce.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is trying to have a significant livestock sector in order to reduce the import bill. However, the funds allocated to these sectors are negligible. Piggery, goat, sheep, beef, apiculture have all received between \$175,000 to \$300,000. Are we planning to have any significant growth with such investments in our extension programme? These sectors require a more targeted approach with goals and timelines clearly identified. Performance of each sector should be measured against these timelines and failure to deliver should be questioned and dealt with.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, does the Ministry of Agriculture have an Individual Commodity Development Plan? Is the funding allocation as per plan? If the Ministry has such a plan and have allocated funding as per plan then good. If the plan or the funding does not match, then people need to know why. Does the Ministry of Agriculture have a dairy sector development plan? Does the Ministry of Agriculture have a beef sector development plan? Does the Ministry of Agriculture have a livestock sector development plan? Does the Ministry of Agriculture have a vegetable and green crop sector development plan?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, money should not be just allocated. It should be in sync with the relevant development plans and achievements should be measured against these plans and reported. We need to look at the agricultural sector commercially and to do this, the Ministry also needs to operate commercially.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allocating funds and utilizing funds are two different things. The Ministry of Agriculture was allocated \$95.2 million in the 2023-2024 Budget. Actual expenditure as per Ministry of Finance statistics until 30th April 2024 was \$48.7 million. Only 50 percent of the funds or \$46.5 million has not been utilized. They have only three months to utilize this unspent fund. What miracle will they pull to do what they have not been able to do in the last nine months? This is a serious issue and needs to be properly looked at or is it a fact that there is no money given the Ministry; *paisa nai hai*.

A lot of time I hear people saying that farmers are lazy and do not work hard. I challenge these critics to spend one day on the farm with the farmer. I am sure you will change your opinion and think twice before making such comments. Do not criticize the hands that feed you and it is our farmers that feed you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has an import-based economy. This shows that we have a robust domestic demand. Fiji is regarded as the hub of the South Pacific. We trade with our Pacific Island neighbours, some of our Pacific Island neighbours have much stronger currency than Fiji. Over the last two decades, the Fijian dollar has been devalued by around 60 percent. This has significantly increased the cost of imports and have further burdened our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think it is time this Government revalues the Fijian dollar by a nominal rate of 20 percentage. Revaluation will increase our purchasing power. The imports will be cheaper. When the imports become cheaper, it will reduce inflationary pressures. Our people's purchasing power will increase with goods becoming cheaper. Ultimately the cost of living of our people will decrease. Some may argue that exports will be more expensive, and it may be more expensive for the tourists to come to Fiji.

Look at the balance of trade. Our imports are much more than our exports and the net effect in terms of savings should be more.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- 16 years.

HON. S. NAND.- For the tourism industry, I am sure the hotels can revise their absurd room rates and make it more competitive. With these, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I await to see a better performing agriculture sector and I thank you for your indulgence. God bless Fiji.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, Attorney-General, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and all our viewers watching on television and the internet.

I rise today to fully support the Coalition Government's Budget for the next financial year as announced by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance on 28th June in this House. I wish to commend our leader, the honourable Prime Minister, Sir, for his leadership in steering us to a new Fiji, a freer Fiji, which over the last 18 months is a Fiji that has enabled our people their basic freedoms; their freedom of speech, their freedom of assembly, their freedom of movement.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- A more secure, sustainable and stable Fiji. I thank honourable Prasad and his team for their hard work to deliver a Budget that realises the same goals. I congratulate the Attorney- General on his appointment and a well delivered speech and timely reminder of his core

role as chief legal advisor to Government, and to uphold the rule of law.

I congratulate my sister Minister, honourable Alitia Bainivalu for being appointed Minister for Fisheries and Forestry, a welcome addition of another woman to Cabinet. I thank the honourable Prime Minister for his continued commitment to promote women's national leadership, no matter where we sit in this House. I thank honourable Ravu for his commitment and service to our people during his tenure.

Secondly, I wish to respond to the repeated criticism against the Government from the Opposition Members and civil society leaders that the social welfare allowances are not enough to sustain a recipient given the cost of living.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Yes.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- I wish to issue a reminder. It is not the sole responsibility of Government to financially sustain the welfare of our social welfare recipients, Mr. Speaker. It is first and foremost the responsibility of the family.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- There you go!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- I want to say this in *iTaukei*, Mr. Speaker. *E sega ni tavi ni Matanitu me qarava vakatabakidua vakailavo na qase, o ira e ra sega ni tu vinaka na tuvaki ni yagodra kei na dravudravua. Oqo nai tavi ni dua na vuvale. Na Matanitu e solia ga na veivuke me vakuria nai tavi e dodonu ga me nona eliu e dua na vuvale.*

Government merely supplements this responsibility in recognition of the service of our older persons that have given to Fiji, and supplementary support for our most vulnerable which are our poor, our children and our disabled. For those that truly need more support, Mr. Speaker, who are abandoned by their family, then this is done on a case by case basis.

But having said that, Mr. Speaker, this Government continues to prioritize the support services to our most vulnerable. An increase in budget, Mr. Speaker last year for our social welfare recipients, it had not been done for years by the previous government and then, of course, this year and this budget, there are two major changes I wish to highlight and I thank honourable Sachida Nand for highlighting it.

Number one, the Transport Assistance Scheme (TAS), this was previously known as the Bus Fare Assistance Scheme that has been supporting around 48,000 beneficiaries. This has been allocated \$13.4 million to subsidise the cost of travel for older persons over 70 and persons with disabilities. To enable beneficiaries to subsidise additional modes of transport beyond the public buses, the programme will be renamed, as I mentioned, the Transport Assistance Scheme. From 1st August, 2024, our Social Pensioners over 70 years old and disability recipients on the Disability Allowance Scheme will no longer be on the Bus Fare Scheme but will receive Transport Assistance in cash of \$25 a month.

Secondly, the establishment of a Child Well-being Centre. Subject to consultation of line ministries and Cabinet approval, this initiative will see our children at risk, who are facing some form of addiction or trauma including majority of our street kids, to be rehabilitated, trained and integrated back into society. An allocation of \$250,000 has been made in this Budget for the renovations of the Vunirewa Bible School in Serua donated by the Methodist Church of Fiji for this purpose.

An initial commitment from the People's Republic of China to fund the programme component shows the confidence in our Government in efforts to effectively tackle the drug and trauma issues faced by our children. We hope more bilateral and donor partners will come on board in these efforts as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, other programmes to note, the Ministry has been allocated \$200,000 under the Welfare Graduation Programme. We aim to increase the skills of our beneficiaries through training programmes and link them to dignified and decent work which matches their skills and experience that will enable them to start jobs or find employment opportunities.

Under this reform agenda, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has engaged two staff in the newly established Welfare Graduation Unit within the Department of Social Protection who will be working in close partnership with employers, our vocational institutions especially Pacific Polytech and I hear the other side of Parliament constantly berating the increase in funding for Pacific Polytech, but they are coming to the table in order to provide these vocational training for our people on Social Welfare and also our women. And, of course, working with the Ministry of Employment on this important programme, which aims to not only support the long-term well-being and resilience of working age beneficiaries but also aims to begin addressing the labour shortage in our economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are building on the Department of Children, it was allocated a budget this year and it will continue into next year. We now have a Director Children, Principal Child Welfare Officer, Welfare Officer and an Administration Officer.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the introduction of the Child Care and Protection Bill and the Child Justice Bill is well into the legislative consultation process. I wish to thank all Members of Parliament for your unanimous support for these Bills and we look forward to the continued support of Parliament when the Bills finally come for debate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department of Women, I am honoured to once again highlight the crucial importance of gender equality and women's rights which is fundamental to the advancement and sustainable development of our Fiji. I am pleased to highlight, we continue to make good progress to align all Government agencies, ministries and sectors to the shared responsibility of empowering our women. I applaud the Ministry of Finance for its leadership in advancing the implementation of gender responsive budgeting. In the Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department of Women further affirms this commitment by an allocation of \$4.34 million for its operations and programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition the Women Economic Empowerment Grants continue to assist our women who wish to venture into business. I want to thank the Juncao Technology Demonstration Centre staff for the pilot project in Makoi which is a pilot project in our urban areas covering approximately 80 women to set up backyard gardens in this large peri-urban area. Since last week, the women of Delaivalelevu have shown interest and we hope this initiative for our women will realise the successes already enjoyed by the Naitasiri Women's Group and Rewa Disabled Women's Group in their backyard farming of mushrooms and related easy cash crops.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we continue to work with our development partners and I wish to thank the Government of Australia, the Government of New Zealand, the World Bank and UNFPA for coming on board in their continued support for our National Action Plan to Prevent Gender Based Violence, the continued development of our Women's Economic Empowerment National Action Plan (WEENAP) and, of course, there is a critical issue of the Tech-Facilitated Gender Based Violence that we are focusing on, including a gender analysis of the online safety legislation and landscape.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, I would like to express support for the Budget presented in Parliament. This is a budget for the people, with diligent efforts to promote stability in the management of our finances, security for our future and sustainability of our debt for our children and their children.

HON. V. NATH.- The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, fellow Members of Parliament and all Fijians watching this from around the world; *Bula vinaka*, good day, *Namaste*, *Aslam Walekum*, *Jai Siya Ram* to all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today with profound disappointment in the 2024-2025 Fijian National Budget presented by honourable Rabuka's Government.

(Hon. Prof. B.C. Prasad interjects)

HON. V. NATH.- Yes, I will, honourable Prasad.

Once again, this Budget fails to meet the expectations of ordinary Fijians, who are grappling with the escalating cost of living.

The people of Fiji anticipated relief from the high cost of living through a reduction in VAT on essential goods and services. Regrettably, the Coalition Government appears to have postponed this measure, perhaps as a strategic to move for future electoral campaigns. That will appear next year, I believe.

This delay adds to the disappointment amongst voters, who entrusted them with their aspirations. Fijians in every household are voicing their concerns about soaring prices of essential goods, a burden that threatens to worsen in the coming months.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, how can an economic-professor-turned-finance Minister overlook the widespread outcry over affordability?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. V. NATH.- Fijians, struggling to make ends meet, are confused by the Government's disconnect from their daily hardships. The Budget theme, "*An Economically Stable, Secure and Sustainable Fiji*", rings hollow without concrete strategies for sustainable economic growth.

Despite lofty promises during the election campaign and supposed public consultations, the Coalition Government has yet, again, failed to deliver on its commitments. Instead of scaling down on lavish pledges, they have inflated the budget by over \$200 million, inching closer to a staggering \$300 million increase from the previous year. This irresponsible fiscal management will push the country's national debt beyond \$10.5 billion, an unprecedented level under this Administration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these budgetary decisions dampen the prospects for genuine economic growth and have tangible negative effects on the lives of ordinary Fijians, if not properly planned. It reduces opportunities for businesses and individuals in low and middle class brackets, to own homes, hindering the ability to build wealth and secure their financial future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, infrastructure development plays a crucial part in long-term prosperity and development. However, the 2024-2025 budgetary allocation for Capital Grant for Fiji Roads Authority has decreased by over \$34 million. Will this mean that from 1st August, 2024, we expect more potholes on our roads?

The FRA, again, in the new financial year has no new projects, similar to other capital projects. It seems like the Coalition Government has nothing new to think about and are continuing with the previous government's projects. The deteriorating conditions of roads continues to create everyday issues.

The WAF was allocated a substantial amount of funding. Every Fijian faces water crisis for weeks and despite that, Government continues to ignore these issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department of Energy fails to address the common problems. We continue to receive calls from poor Fijians requesting for connectivity where new house wiring is being done and people are waiting, and not connected to the EFL grid.

Fiji is highly vulnerable to climate change and climate produced disasters. In last six years, the Fijian Government has spent around \$500 million in rehabilitation works. The deteriorating state of our roads and water crisis plaguing various regions reflect this neglect.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics has repeatedly failed to allocate funding for new projects. There is nothing new in the 2024-2025 Budget. The ongoing projects were all approved by the previous government and the Coalition Government is now here to cut ribbons and show that under their administration, those projects were implemented.

The Health Sector was allocated substantial funding under their capital projects in the 2023-2024 financial year to fund a number of projects. I have been informed that most of their capital projects were not implemented. Is that true? I am requesting the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services to, please, look into this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to take this time to talk about climate change and the policy shortcomings. The Budget also exhibits a lack of innovation and action on climate change. Repeated allotments without new ideas or concrete implementation plans highlight the Government's future to access green climate funds, despite the solid groundwork laid down by the previous Administration.

The lack of policy directions and action on climate change is not just a failure of imagination but a serious threat to our nation's future. The continued reliance on outdated and ineffective strategies means that Fiji is falling behind in the global effort to combat climate change.

Our people are already experiencing the adverse effects of climate change and the Government's failure to address this issue with urgency and innovation is dereliction of duty.

The previous government had laid the groundwork for accessing green climate funds, but this Administration has failed to build on that foundation. I understand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I know that this will be microwaved, renamed or rebuild in the next Budget (I will put on the table).

This lacks the plan and vision that is typical of this Coalition Government and the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance is costing us just not financially, but also environmentally, jeopardizing the future of our children and grandchildren.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V. NATH.- The groundwork is already done, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but you have done nothing.

The substantial increase in the Police budget makes me wonder where this funding is going to. The rise in crime rate, particularly targeting specific communities, threaten social cohesion, and the economic stability does not justify this substantial increase. The Government's failure to address these security challenges undermines public confidence and investor trust, hindering economic growth and prosperity. It is unacceptable that the Fiji Police Force has been unable to effectively address and control these crimes, leading to awful consequences on our economy and social fabric.

Public safety and security is crucial for fostering a conducive environment for economic growth and attracting investments. When crime rate escalates and citizens feel unsafe, it undermines confidence and hampers economic activities. This not only affects individuals and communities, but also discourages both domestic and foreign investments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the PAP, NFP and SODELPA Coalition are all going to an unknown or rather different direction, where each Party has its own agenda. The honourable Prime Minister, at one point in time, says something and the following week, he apologises to the nation for his statement.

To put fuel to the fire, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics issues another statement to cover the honourable Prime Minister's statement. It seems like that there is no solidarity or aim to serve the people, but three different Parties are serving different groups of people.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Absolute hogwash!

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I call upon all honourable Members of this Parliament to hold the Coalition accountable for their failures. The people of Fiji deserve leaders who prioritise their welfare over personal gain and political manoeuvring. Let us work together to steer Fiji towards a future where prosperity is shared by all, not just a privileged group or privileged few.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government's lack of accountability and foresight jeopardises Fiji's future. Their penchant for rhetoric over action, combined with lavish spending and broken promises, paints a grim picture for our nation's governance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the figures on paper may look rosy-rosey, but the reality on the ground seems different. I will take you to 2023-2024 Budget. The capital project utilisation was only 41.47 percent. Let me throw some light or furnish this Parliament with few of the projects which were not even touched and had zero utilisation. I will just take a few, there is a whole list, and thanks to honourable Premila Kumar for asking this Oral Question which was furnished to this Parliament through the Ministry of Finance. This is the list:

- (a) Bridge general - \$500,000;
- (b) Miscellaneous infrastructure- \$400,000;
- (c) Building infrastructure - \$182,000;
- (d) Rural electrification - \$400,115;
- (e) Naboro landfill design stage - \$200,000 to \$300,000;

HON. P.K. BALA.- *Paisa nai hai.*

HON. V. NATH.- *Paisa nai hai.* This was just last year. I am talking about 2023-2024 Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is properly spelt out there that these projects were there but never been addressed.

HON. P.K. BALA.- I do not know what is the honourable Minister doing?

HON. V. NATH.- *Paisa nai hai*. I remember when the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics was on this side, he is very easy to speak, but to address the people of Fiji, is difficult, and to run a government is difficult, because we know. He was always harping when he was at this side.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to declare my interest to be an independent Member of Parliament for my remaining parliamentary tenure, based on the current status. I will continue to echo my voice and opinion on the same platform set by the former Prime Minister, Mr. Bainimarama.

With those words, I do not support the 2024-2025 Budget.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and my fellow Fijians; my contribution to the Budget Debate will focus on four major things:

- (1) Dealing with drugs;
- (2) Resetting the Police;
- (3) Reforming the RFMF; and
- (4) Making Immigration Services more efficient.

But before I do that, Mr. Speaker, I would like to make a short reply to the comments made by honourable Naivalurua on two specific issues, one on Police reset and secondly, the matter of the Narcotics Bureau.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to assure the honourable Member that our only Commissioner will be a Fijian. He will be a man in blue, as I have assured Parliament already. He will not be a man in green, nor in red, nor will he be a foreigner. He will be a Policeman or a Policewoman. So, the executive leadership of the Fiji Police Force will be a Fijian and I just want to assure you that.

On the matter of the mentor, Mr. Speaker, a mentor is about a sounding board. Every good leader will know that they need help.

Now, Mr. Speaker, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and myself were mentored by great people in the RFMF. I think we testified to that. We are standing here today because we were mentored well. We had good leaders.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I find the relevance for it, that a mentor is someone who gives proper advice when the time is right. I would just like to assure honourable Naivalurua that there is no ulterior motive about giving help and that is why we need help from everyone as we do. Parliament needs help from UNDP. It is not local, so that is what we are doing.

On the matter of the Narcotics Bureau, I support the idea raised by honourable Naivalurua for a Special Committee of Parliament, under Standing Order 129, to deal with drugs. This is a very important and emotional issue for me, Mr. Speaker. Exactly five years ago, I said exactly the same thing to the honourable Member. I got assaulted for it in this Parliament.

The government at that time, Sir, they did not need help. Now, I am telling Fiji, I need help. We need to fix it. When that is raised, I am going to fix it. I have said that the Narcotics Bureau will

be the solution to lead Government's fight against this. So, I want to say, Mr. Speaker, that we are doing something about it, and we are passionate about it, and I am going to acknowledge that later.

So, I think the honourable Member will understand. Fiji needs good leaders. The Fiji Police Force needs good leaders. Good leaders understand they need help. We all need help, and that I will support your motion to have a Parliamentary Committee to look after drugs.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration is at the forefront of safeguarding our nation. Our strategic focus includes implementing critical initiatives, such as the ongoing National Security and Defence Review (NSDR), establishing a dedicated Narcotics Bureau, and supporting the Police Reset Initiative. These initiatives are designed to modernise our security infrastructure and address contemporary threats effectively.

Mr. Speaker, the establishment of the Narcotics Bureau is a crucial step in combating the scourge of illicit drugs in our society. This Bureau will spearhead our National Narcotics Strategy, focusing on prevention, enforcement and rehabilitation.

We are committed to creating a safer environment for all Fijians by eradicating the menace of illicit drugs. This initiative represents our dedication to protecting our communities from the devastating effects of drug abuse and trafficking.

Truly, this is becoming a national issue, I agree. I am encouraged to see that we, Fijians, are coming together as a community to do what we can to combat this epidemic. I would like to especially mention the Fiji National University, Fiji Village, Ms. Kalesi Volatabu and Drugs Free World Fiji, Fiji Council of Churches, *vanua* and many other NGOs who have made this fight their priority. The nation called and they stood up to the challenge.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Police Reset Initiative is a significant component of our strategy to restore the integrity and effectiveness of our law enforcement agencies. By enhancing intelligence capabilities, human resources and strategic operational planning, we are committed to making our police force more responsive, accountable and effective in combating crime.

We are embracing modern technologies such as advanced forensic tools, digitizing criminal records and deploying drones for surveillance. These advancements will enable our police force to effectively combat sophisticated crimes and ensure public safety. Furthermore, we are dedicated to the continuous professional development of our police personnel, ensuring they are well-equipped to handle the evolving landscape of criminal activities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to add a special thanks today to the Australian Government through the High Commissioner in Fiji, His Excellency Ewen McDonald and the Commissioner of the Australian Federal Police, Commissioner Kershaw for their support to our Police Reset Initiative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the RFMF remains steadfast in its commitment to protect Fiji and contribute to global peacekeeping efforts. This year, we are focusing on internal restructuring to improve efficiency, establishing the Joint Logistics Command, and implementing the Automated Logistics Management Systems. These initiatives will streamline its operations, reduce costs and enhance its overall capability.

Our naval division continues to safeguard our vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and support maritime operations critical to our national security and economic interests. The surveillance of Fiji's EEZ and the execution of maritime search-and-rescue missions are vital to our sovereignty and economic well-being.

The National Security and Defence Review (NSDR), although not yet released has already provided us with invaluable insights. I want to take this moment to extend our gratitude to the review team led by Mr. Jim Sanday, for their thorough and dedicated work. The insights from this review will form the bedrock of our future national security strategies, ensuring that we are prepared to face modern threats with robust and effective measures. This review emphasizes the importance of modernizing our military capabilities, improving our logistics, and enhancing our readiness to respond to various threats.

We are also focusing on the professional development of our military personnel, ensuring they have access to the latest training and technology. This commitment to excellence will enhance our ability to protect Fiji's interests both at home and abroad. Our continued participation in UN missions demonstrates our dedication to global peace and security, and the NSDR will help us maintain and improve our contributions to these important international efforts.

In terms of Immigration, we are committed to making our immigration services more efficient and effective. This involves a comprehensive approach to streamline processes, improve customer service and leverage technology. Here is how we plan to achieve this:

- (1) Streamlining Processes;
- (2) Improving Customer Service; and
- (3) Leveraging on Technology to assist us in the work that we do.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we continue to strive to enhance national security, this is the heart of our work and specifically we are supporting law enforcement abilities in Fiji particularly to deal with the work of the Police today. All our law enforcement agencies, our border agencies and in particular Immigration in terms of looking after or processing people who come from abroad to come and work in Fiji. We are committed to our international peacekeeping effort, and we are committed to providing an environment for economic and social stability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am running out of time, and I take this opportunity to thank the Commander and team RFMF, Commissioner of Police and team Fiji Police Force, the Permanent Secretary of my Ministry and also the Director of Immigration and all the hard work that has been put in by the Ministry of Home Affairs to try and help to keep our Fijians and our communities safe. I would like to end by saying that I support the Budget that is before Parliament.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am speaking in this Parliament Chamber for the first time as a crossbench Member of Parliament. This situation has come about because of a decision that I made in this Parliament, (a decision that I do not regret) and decisions that were made by others outside of this Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me say at the outset, that the decisions made outside of this Parliament were theirs to make and I respect, and the reasonings behind their decisions, I will not question. I have accepted the situation I am in, and I will move on as a crossbench Member of Parliament for the remainder of this Parliament term. I have made my choice also publicly, and as the saying goes "You are free to choose, but you are not free from the consequences of your choice." That, I understand very well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite all that has happened, I stand here today with a sense of freedom; freedom to exercise my own judgement, freedom to consult across the floor, freedom to work with others including those across the floor; all to ensure that I serve our citizens well. Today is a new start for me.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, democracy is only partly about votes and seats in the legislature because democracy is mostly about human encounter and interaction. It is about arguing our cases, debating, it is about compromise across different people, people with different beliefs, different political affiliations, people who may be radically different than ourselves, but we have to learn to say, “Okay, I may not understand you fully where you are coming from, but I am beginning to see you and I show you respect, admiration and reverence.”

The politics of “us versus them” and “it is my way or the highway” and I must say still flavoring this Parliament is a form of politics that sows seeds of anger and hatred. When it comes from this Parliament, we are not being good examples to the multi-racial, multicultural and multi-religious society that we serve. I think that we need more humanity in our politics rather than identity. This is why I made my only interjection (rather loudly) in response to honourable Kiran’s speech yesterday.

I was disappointed because she is supposed to be spearheading the move towards reconciliation. If one is genuine about reconciliation, one must bite the bullet and let go of his or her anger and hatred and bias. I want to remind the honorable Sashi Kiran, through you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the two gentlemen that she somewhat ridiculed in her speech, in my view unfairly, because they are not here to defend themselves have a combined total of 160,000 votes and in that 160,000 are people that you would want to come to the reconciliation table. That speech yesterday will just make them clam up and stay away.

(Chorus of interjections)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a budget is one of the most important aspects of a democracy because through the budget, development is pursued. Development, defined as a process that creates growth and brings in progress and positive change. My judgement of the budget will be based on that definition and my general view is that the budget creates growth but not as big as we want it to be. It provides for some progress, but not as fast as we want it to be. It provides for some positive changes but not as much as we want it to be, but Mr Speaker Sir, we do not live in a perfect world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to raise four issues on the 2024-2025 Budget. First is this issue of the Vatuwaqa Primary School. You might recall that I had raised a few questions in Parliament on the repair of Vatuwaqa Primary School, the building that was burnt the day before Elections in 2022. Despite the assurances from both the honourable Minister of Education that it was going to be repaired, nothing has materialised to date and there is no provision for it in this Budget; if there is one, I do not see it. I plead with the honourable Prime Minister to please intervene and allow the repair of this school. Perhaps, Government can take back the school given it was a Government school before.

Mr. Speaker, Sir this school is in a tsunami safe zone. It is very convenient for the children in the informal settlement nearby to attend the school (just a short walking distance away) and it is very convenient for USP students who come with their family to send their children there. The longer we leave it, the more deterioration will set in to the otherwise perfectly good buildings that are currently standing there.

Second, while I am still on education, I would like to voice my disagreement and disappointment on a statement that the honourable Deputy Prime Minister made during his delivery of the Budget where he said, and I quote:

“In fact, we spent around \$160 million on almost 22,000 students who never completed their studies, a major loss for the taxpayers. We have got that changed now and the focus will have to be on quality.”

In other words, money wasted.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am assuming that the word “quality” here means that the threshold mark will be increased for those that want to access this facility. The question is, how far high you will go before you can say that the money used on the students who never complete their studies are not a major loss to the taxpayers because in my view, it should never be seen as a loss in the first place anyway. Some of those taxpayers would be parents of those students and you would not want to tell them that they had wasted their money on their children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, money spent on education is never wasted regardless of how far the student progresses, that is the cost of developing our nation’s human resources. The statistics that the honourable Deputy Prime Minister provided were very selective and incomplete because surely some of those students he was referring to would be gainfully employed by now. Some of those students with low marks would have completed their studies with flying colours.

Third, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the budget is the allocation to SPCA on Animal Welfare. Whilst I welcome the \$130,000 allocated, this is the same amount last year and I hoped that it would increase this year given the ever-increasing number of stray cats and dogs on our streets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the contributing factors to stray dogs and cats is the high veterinary charges and the high cost of animal medicine. A tax relief on the medicine costs would help and also a tax concession perhaps to those that donate to SPCA and other animal shelters would go a long way towards curbing animal cruelty.

Fourth, Mr. Speaker, Sir is on the allocation to RFMF and especially the allocation to peacekeeping. I thank the Government for their continuous support to RFMF and especially peacekeeping. I disagree with my friend the honourable Shalen Kumar on his suggestion yesterday, to do away with peacekeeping and divert the fund to the Police.

During one of the Post-Budget Dialogue, it was reported that a Professor stated and I quoted: “Peacekeeping is useless.” Such an insensitive comment. My disappointment here also is that the honourable Deputy Prime Minister did not defend peacekeeping and the peacekeepers there during that discussion, and the Minister responsible for RFMF has not said anything about that insensitive comment. I may be biased because I am a former peacekeeper, but I am not the only one in this Parliament and there are thousands of others and their families outside this Parliament who would feel the same.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, peacekeeping is never useless, because through Fiji’s participation in missions around the world, Fiji’s voice is heard and Fiji commands respect on the world stage. Some of the countries say yes to Fiji’s request, they do so because they respect the fact that a small country like Fiji is punching above its own weight when it comes to fulfilling its global citizen responsibilities through the boots of our soldiers on peacekeeping grounds.

Mr. Speaker Sir, to say that peacekeeping is useless is to infer that the soldiers who happen to be sons, husbands, fathers who paid the ultimate sacrifice whilst serving in those various peacekeeping missions died in vain. It is a desecration of the sacred memories of these brave souls. How dare you say that peacekeeping is useless! Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will support this Budget.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and all Fijians who are also watching on livestream.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver my contribution on the 2024-2025 Budget delivered by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics on Friday, 28th June, 2024.

I would like to commend the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and everyone who helped contribute to the 2024-2025 National Budget, especially the contributions from the various stakeholders that form the foundation of Fiji's development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Sunday, 7th July marked the 46th anniversary of Independence of the Solomon Islands. The date marks a significant chapter also for our fellow Fijians of Solomon Islands descent as it gives them a day to remember, reconnect and celebrate their roots and heritage. There is no other Pacific Island country that has contributed immensely to Fiji than Solomon Islands. All the major roads in Vanua Levu including Taveuni were constructed by Solomon Island blackbirders.

MR. SPEAKER.- Declare your interest.

(Laughter)

HON. S. TUBUNA.- I congratulate the Solomon Islands Government and its people on their 46 years of Independence.

Before I go into my speech, I would like to address some issues that has been raised by the Opposition. First, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the issue of Pacific Polytech. I wish to emphasize that Pacific Polytech was established in 2021 and approved through the Higher Education Commission. It caters for students from low-income families and those who cannot access FNU.

I recently attended a graduation at Pacific Polytech and I was amazed that 99 percent of the students are from the *iTaukei* community. These students would have fallen into crimes and other social ills if Pacific Polytech was not there. Secondly, most Opposition members have continued to criticize the Coalition Government's effort in establishing infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, majority of the infrastructure in this country was undertaken and established in the 1970s and 1990s during Ratu Mara's time and very minimal was done during the FijiFirst time. These infrastructure works, included the Suva-Nadi Highway, the Monasavu Hydro Scheme, the Seaqaqa Cane Development and Irrigation Scheme, and this just shows that the previous Government had done all the infrastructure that was there and minimal was done by the FijiFirst Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I refer to some honourable Opposition Members who continue to promote that racial divide is widening amongst the major races in Fiji. This is far from the truth, as this Government is firm in its believe that we need to promote inter-racial harmony in this country, and this is to begin from our schools.

Yesterday, I was blessed to have been a part of the opening ceremony of Navesi Primary and Kindergarten School. I was honoured to have received their invitation because it is at the tender age where we can mould our children to become innovative, creative, analytical and critical thinkers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, videos of the opening ceremony are circulating widely on the social media on the traditional protocols that were carried out by the Kindergarten students of Navesi. This is evidence of the idea that our children need our utmost attention, love and care, training and modelling our values to them at a tender age, moving away from the laid back excuse and moving towards being a productive and responsible citizens of our beloved Fiji. They were also involved in performing Indian and Chinese dances, and this is what this Coalition Government is trying to promote.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the end of this month, as part of the National Reconciliation and Unity initiative, we will be hosting a field day in the highlands of Viti Levu. During this field day, Indian ladies and farmers from Sabeto will be there teaching *iTaukei* ladies on how to plant the cowpea and other crops. This is a government that is trying to promote social cohesion amongst our communities.

On the Asian Subterranean Termites, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the Coalition Government assumed office at the end of 2022, we were informed of the infestation of the Asian Subterranean termites, which have not only caused structural weakening of the wooden foundations but also instilled fear and anxiety among homeowners in the Western Division.

The termite infestation problem was reported to the Biosecurity Authority of Fiji (BAF) in 2009. However, due to insufficient attention by the previous Government, the issue escalated, resulting in widespread infestation and significant property damages. The Coalition Government allocated \$3 million in the last Budget. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to inform Parliament that the provision of \$3 million has already been spent, and we have assisted 448 families.

Therefore, the provision of \$2 million in the 2024-2025 Budget is welcomed to provide relief packages to homeowners affected by termites, and we will first roll out this initiative in the most affected areas in the Western Division. This is a testament of the Coalition Government's strategic collaboration and community involvement aimed at creating a resilient defence against the threats posed by these invasive termites.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the foresight of the Coalition Government in recognising the contribution of minority communities in nation building. As the Assistant Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister, I welcome the budgetary allocation for minority communities in Fiji under the Office of the Prime Minister.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$130,000 has been allocated to the Melanesian-*Vasu i Taukei* communities; \$300,000 to the Rotuma Island Council; \$200,000 for the Rabi Island Council and \$70,000 for the Kioa Island Council. These allocations are intended to empower these communities with development projects that build confidence in themselves, ensuring improved livelihood and self-resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, I commend the efforts of all Government Ministries, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics and his team for their diligent work on the 2024-2025 Budget. The Budget is a reflection of the collective efforts of all Government Ministries that addresses the diverse community needs, demonstrating a commitment to our nation's growth and development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge this august Parliament to endorse this Budget for the betterment of our nation and the wellbeing of our citizens. I commend the 2024-2025 National Budget to Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Tubuna, for your response. Before I offer the floor to the *Turaga na Tui Nalawa*, I would like to acknowledge our Ambassador in Geneva who is sitting in the gallery. Welcome to our Parliament, Your Excellency.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and to the people of Fiji following the debate on the radio, television and via live stream; *ni sa yadra vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before proceeding with my budget response, I would like to congratulate honourable Graham Leung for his appointment as Attorney-General of Fiji.

I will also wish, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to congratulate *Na i 'aukei ni Vara'*, honourable Alitia Bainivalu, as Minister for Fisheries and Forestry. It is an honour and an achievement to the people of Ra, as one of our daughters have been appointed as the first lady Minister of this particular Ministry in which we are grateful to the honourable Prime Minister.

MR. SPEAKER.- Very true.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Sir, I rise to support the 2024-2025 National Budget...

MR. SPEAKER.- Very true, honourable Member, coming from the interior.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- ...which was presented to this august Parliament by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics on 28th June, 2024. I would like to thank the honourable Minister and his team for putting forward this Budget. I thank our people, not only for helping get us this far, but for the belief in our ability to take us forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the Coalition Government for the continuing free education programme for our children. We all know that if Fiji is to be successful, we need to educate our young ones. This Budget ensures that that will continue.

Despite the hard times, our Budget provides for our future generations and should be commended. Mr. Speaker, Sir, no matter what happens, we need to ensure that our children continue to get educated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, more than just learning about science and accounting, I would like to remind parents that they have the responsibility to teach their children the importance of being good people. Learning starts at home by ensuring our children grow up as good human beings. Parents, please, talk to your children, watch over them, give them guidance and help them to become better citizens of Fiji.

Turaga saka na Sipika, ni sa veivuke saka na Matanitu vei keda na i tubutubu me baleta na i curucuru ni vuli, au sa veivakauqeti, ka'u kerea me ra vuli na gone ka me kakua ni levu na biu vuli dole vei keda na kawa i-Taukei. Na vuli vinaka ena kauta tani na bula dravudravua vei keda na kawa i-Taukei.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome and support the Budget initiative, specifically on the empowering of our indigenous communities through targeted support and incentives. This includes the grant to Provincial Councils, Village Transformation Initiative and the iTaukei Resource Owners Development Scheme.

Turaga saka na Sipika, sa kena gauna me da sa yadra na Kawa i- Taukei meda vakayagataka na veivuke esa solia saka tu na Matanitu ena kena tarai cake na noda dui veikorokoro, ka'u nuitaka ni ko ni na cakacakataka na Mata ni vei Tikina kei na Turaga ni Koro na veika sa cauraki saka tiko, me rawa ni soli ki na nomuni vei Tikina se Koro na veivuke esa solia saka tiko na Matanitu.

Turaga saka na Speaker, au kerea talega kevaka e rawa ni dikevi vakatotolo na Tabacakacaka i Taukei kei na Valenivolavola e nodra na Vunilawa ena kena vakalawataki na lawa ena noda veikorokoro vaka-Viti, oya na Village Bylaws.

Kevaka e da vinakata me tarovi eso na i tovo vakadomobula e yaco tiko ena noda veikorokoro, me vaka na waigaga ni veivakamatemitaki, kucu, na nodra vakalolomataki o ira na tinada kei na luveda, kei na kena maroroi na lewa vakaturaga, esa dodonu me raica vakatotolo na Matanitu na veika au sa cauraka saka tiko oqo me baleta na kena vakalawataki na lawa ni koro.

Sir, I thank the Government that a holistic approach is needed to tackle the drug problem, a problem in my view which is very detrimental to the future of our country. I acknowledge the Government for the establishment of the Narcotics Bureau with a Special Drug Unit within the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions.

I am also thankful that funding will be provided to the Fiji Police Force to procure drug testing equipment to ramp up drug tests across the country and the Drug Rehabilitation Incentive Package which has been developed for the private sector and other civil society organisations, to set up drug rehabilitation centres to further boost our efforts in the fight against drugs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am calling on all Fijians to work together and solve the issue of drugs, as people are moving away from marijuana but are going into hard drugs which is a very sad situation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the Government for the allocation of \$101 million to the Ministry of Agriculture to boost the agriculture economy.

The subsistence economy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, long the economic model for the rural areas must be strengthened. In fact, this model is keeping Fiji above water when compared to other countries. There is no lack of food in Fiji, unlike in other countries. It is through the subsistence economy that we have as part of our makeup. There is the sea for seafood, the mangroves and the land all available as sources of sustenance. We must focus on these areas. Countries are internalising their economies. For Fiji, this subsistence economy can be a huge part of the equation.

It is encouraging, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that villagers are now growing and selling vegetables at attractive prices by the roadside, long the domain of other communities. This trend must be encouraged as it will also lead to the reduction in leakages for tourism with food supplies being purchased locally.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to commend the Government for all the developments that have been carried out in the Province of Ra, from road to infrastructure development and I do hope that this will continued in this Budget.

I plead with the Government through the Public Works Department to consider rural roads, like Nasau, Nakorotubu, Nailuva and other roads in Ra, which require urgent attention. Certain parts for these roads need to be tarsealed, honourable Minister for Public Works and Meteorological Services and Transport, as it is really bad during rainy season which affect travellers during rainy weather. Sir, I come from the interior, and I know their struggles.

MR. SPEAKER.- *Vinaka vakalevu.*

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have noted that no allocation has been made for the re-establishment of the FSC Penang Sugar Mill. But I know that it will come next year, as the honourable Minister for Sugar has clearly spelt out in this august Parliament in May this year that, and I quote: "it may not start now, but it will definitely finish before the end of our term."

It is our hope that the Penang Mill will be a full scale refinery with an opportunity to come back bigger and better, bringing economic opportunities in the Ra area. I have noted that the honourable Minister for Sugar has revealed that FSC has looked into purchasing a second-hand mill from China to be installed in Rakiraki, which we are very grateful for.

Sir, very dollar that has been allocated in this Budget is shared with a clear intention that should benefit all Fijians. I request the Government to ensure that the Budget is delivered so to allow Fijians to enjoy the assistance and incentives which was announced.

I must commend the various arms of Government for their untiring effort to keep our country running. I ask all Fijians to care for one another and continue to pray for our beloved nation. We show the true Fijian spirit that there is nothing that we cannot achieve.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to once again declare my full support for the 2024-2025 National Budget.

MR. SPEAKER.- *Vinaka vakalevu*, honourable Ratu Josaia Niudamu, for that wonderful speech. It is a first time that I have heard a chief stressing the importance of ensuring that we have protective legislations for the villages and all, because of how we can best support the Minister for Home Affairs in the drug issues that have infiltrated the villages.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion at hand. The honourable Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, fellow Fijians, ladies and gentlemen; I thank you for the opportunity to address Parliament and elaborate on the budgetary allocation for the Ministry of Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport.

I also acknowledge the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics and his team in the Ministry of Finance for the hard work undertaken for the Budget Outcome 2024 -2025 and in producing the second Budget of the Coalition Government.

I also take this opportunity to congratulate honourable Graham Leung as Attorney-General and honourable Alitia Bainivalu as Minister for Fisheries and Forestry.

At the outset, I wanted to say that this Coalition Government knows the importance of infrastructure and understands, especially in terms of water, energy, general infrastructure, sea transport.

It is through this Coalition Government that we will improve and better develop this sector to lessen the load on our urban infrastructure. It is also through this Government that we will assist in the rural and maritime areas in terms critical infrastructure such as roads, bridges, ports, jetties which has been a major concern.

In terms of the 2023-2024 Budget achievements, let me highlight some of the deliverables in terms of what the Ministry has achieved.

We have launched the 2050 Water Strategy, and it provides strategic directions in moving forward - where we want to take our Water Sector in terms of development and coverage.

The Viria Water Project, thank you to the last Government for initiating this. It continues and we have brought this online and continue with the various stages which is a responsibility of any

incoming government in terms of line extension and, of course, rural water upgrades and related urban upgrades.

Similarly, for various roads and bridges, projects have been delivered and upgraded and maintenance projects brought up to date, despite the mess left behind by the previous government.

It is just demeaning and insulting to our roads, water, maritime, energy, workshop and technical and other hardworking staff to hear members of the Opposition say that nothing has been done or there is no progress.

I would like to make special mention of our development partners in terms of our infrastructure and thank the ADB, EIB, GEF, the Australian Government through the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility in the Pacific and People's Republic of China, in addition to others, and thank them sincerely for their continuous support. This support will greatly assist us in connecting the unconnected and enhance those who are connected with roads, water and power, especially for our women and children in vulnerable situations such as isolated rural areas or informal settlements.

Sir, in terms of enabling legislations, we have passed the first ever Fiji Meteorological and Hydrological Services Act 2024. This, recognises and empowers the Fiji Meteorological Services in delivering responsibilities effectively.

We have also endorsed the re-establishment of the Public Works Department with the aim of remodelling and effectively managing rural infrastructure and other services. This works include maintenance of rural roads, water sanitation, energy, as well as construction and maintenance of various Government buildings which have been neglected under the previous government and we will continue to work and improve on this.

The proposed policy direction and legislative amendments have been initiated within LTA, to ensure a more efficient and well-regulated transport system. Sir, in addition to these, a special press release have been done in order to upgrade the public on the deliverables from the 2024 -2025 Budget and if the Opposition had listened carefully, most of what have been set out to be achieved have been achieved.

I would like to commend the Coalition Government, through the Ministry of Finance, for the level of budgetary support we have received, and we will continue to invest in infrastructure developments to raise the standard of essential infrastructure and, of course, access to markets and services in moving forward, especially for the rural communities.

With the allocation of \$721.4 million, comprising \$210 million for Operating Expenditure and \$507.4 million for Capital Expenditure, leaving \$4.1 million for VAT, this will greatly support the expected work deliverables within the Ministry. I am grateful that our Infrastructure Budget has been pulled together under one Head which is Head 40, this will greatly facilitate work in the Ministry in terms of project management, grant management and also one of the main concerns raised which is effective monitoring.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of Fiji Roads Authority, again we will be focusing on the deliverables and ensuring that our people get better services in moving forward in this financial year. With the \$354.8 million which comprises \$16 million for Operation Grant and \$338.8 million for Capital Grant and again this will assist with the ongoing construction and maintenance of roads, upgrading and replacement of bridges and jetties as we move forward, particularly Maintenance Budget of \$120 million, Renewals and Replacements of Roads and Bridges \$70 million, Upgrading

Bridges and Crossings \$29 million, New Jetties Construction \$15 million, Rural Roads \$24 million and a New Community Programme with a budget of \$23 million focusing on community, village roads, schools and similar roads which had been neglected in the past and which had been disregarded as non-FRA roads. The re-instatement of the Public Works Department will complement the road works done by FRA as we move forward to ensure that there is no duplication and the budget allocation is \$5 million, and of course, this will also look after our rural people and ensure they are connected as we have already mentioned.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will continue to assist Land Transport Authority (LTA) in terms of its operations and LTA has been allocated a budget of \$36.7 million, comprising \$26 million as Operating Grant and \$10.7 Capital Grant. I wish to update the Ministry that the LTA has finalised Cabinet Papers in terms of re-opening permits and looking at the various regulatory and legislative amendments to move us forward in that area.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, and of course Water, this has been a key area in terms of the gripe by the Opposition. Of course, I have mentioned the Water Strategy and Water Authority of Fiji has been allocated \$259.45 million, \$135 million for Capital Expenditure. So there are capital expenditures in every allocation I have made and I am not sure why the Opposition is saying that there is no capital injection. The Budget allocation is projected to target improvement in both Water and Wastewater in moving forward and that is in terms of our deliverables as far as water is concerned.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is also another important programme in terms of digital transformation. Water cannot move forward with the latest technological developments and this will be prioritising seamless operations of critical water, reticulation mechanical and electrical assets on a 24/7 basis as we move forward.

Of course, in Energy, again a sum of \$9.6 million, it is critical here that we will be extending various power grids particularly Rotuma, Lakeba and of course our Rural Electrification Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in these last few minutes ask a critical question before I conclude. Why does the Opposition politicise infrastructure? That is the fundamental question, everytime we speak, they are politicising infrastructure.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Ask yourself, we learned from you.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Because in infrastructure whatever that has been done, we shall continue the work and that is what the Coalition Government is doing. However, when we came in, of course, we did not come in when everything was rosy as what they are saying.

(Inaudible interjection)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- For example in the three-year period when we did a special audit for FRA, the cost variation and escalation of \$405 million in a three-year from July 2020 to 2023, these variations were largely facilitated through flying minutes and with the concurrence of the Minister of Everything who is no longer here. This is a significant amount and exceeded the annual budget for each of the three years. It is equivalent to 10 percent of the National Budget and they are also emphasising continuously about big projects.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Put the reports here!

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- This Government is not about big projects, it is about projects which enhance the livelihood and uplifts the lives of the people; not the projects which you have done. For example, the Four-Lane Project for Nadi \$65 million, this escalated with a cost overrun of \$50.9 million. Included in that was \$600,000 bought for bougainvillea plants which were not even tendered. These are the shenanigans which we had to fix when we come in as a Coalition Government. Just imagine if we did not come in, it would continue, and I do not know whether the Government would still exist, or it would be bankrupt; that is the problem.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I have got about 30 seconds.

The other issue, apart from that, I have just landed on my table a \$23 million debt that we need to pay from the previous government for engineering services and this has been taken to court. I am thinking of putting a motion that \$23.8 million be divided by 26 amongst the Opposition.

(Laughter)

Sir, \$915,000 each surcharged, then you can pay \$30,500 a month before your term ends in 2026. These are the kinds of things we have to deal with when we come in; it is not simple. The other thing, Sir, just give me a few seconds.

On FRA, I asked the CEO, “what was the situation?” Let me quote this, “The previous government had advised that after the budget announcement that they will have a supplementary budget after elections where additional funding will be provided to maintain the momentum of road rehabilitation works and meet the contractual obligations.” That is why when we came in, nothing was there. Sir, I support the Budget.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Exposed, exposed!

MR. SPEAKER.- That was a fiery contribution. I was just given a question by one of the Members from the Opposition, how come he was given more time when the light was already red, maybe he was reading the wrong figures up there.

HON. MEMBER.- Colour blind.

MR. SPEAKER.- I intend to adjourn Parliament now for lunch and we will resume when the bell is sounded.

The Parliament adjourned at 1.03 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.31 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- You seem to be smiling a lot honourable Koroilavesau.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament, I rise to give my response to the 2024-2025 Budget Address given by the honourable Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2024-2025 Budget proposal, as presented by the honourable Minister for Finance, outlines measures that, is aimed at economic stability, however, it fails to address the pressing needs of our people, especially those most vulnerable in our society. I have grave concerns over the direction our nation's economy is taking under this Government's fiscal policies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the most alarming aspects of the past budgets was the increase in VAT and in this Budget, we see there is no push to lower VAT to give some needed relief to the people of Fiji. While I understand the necessity of generating revenue for our nation's development, we must not do so at the expense of our citizens' wellbeing. With the high cost of living rising day by day at an alarming rate, coupled with new taxation policies, it burdens our already struggling families.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the backbone of our economy is our people - the hardworking men and women who contribute daily to the growth and prosperity of our nation. At least a simple act of kindness from this Government to lower VAT would have given much needed relief for the people and any competent Minister, the honourable Minister of Finance would have found creative ways and means of generating the lost revenue.

Currently, families are already stretched thin by the rising cost of living, and this additional financial strain threatens their ability to provide even the most basic necessities for their children. Furthermore, such tough fiscal measures risk stifling economic growth by dampening consumer spending, which is a critical driver of our economy. When families are forced to allocate more of their income to basic needs, discretionary spending declines, affecting businesses across all sectors and potentially leading to job losses and economic stagnation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I therefore urge this Government to reconsider its approach. Instead of burdening our people, we should explore alternative revenue-generating strategies that do not impact our most vulnerable citizens. Measures such as closing tax loopholes and combating tax evasion among the wealthy could generate substantial revenue without further burdening those who are already struggling to make ends meet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while I recognise the importance of fiscal prudence, it should not come at the expense of our people's welfare. We must adopt policies that foster economic growth, while ensuring fairness and equity for all Fijians. Let us prioritise the well-being of our citizens first and foremost as we navigate these challenging economic times.

Turning now to the critical issue of the sugar sector, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The business of sugar cane production means planting cane on time, tilling the land on time, harvesting it on time, applying fertiliser and manure on time, needs substantial efficient Government intervention and timely assistance. It is saddening to note that many cane farmers are for various reasons, unhappy today as they want a sympathetic and caring Government that is sensitive to their needs and aspirations. This is reflected in the unwanted mill stoppages, breakdowns and delays in the processing of work visa for mechanical harvesters drivers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the farmers throughout the nation were expecting to hear the guaranteed sugar cane price per tonne, as promised before, \$110 per tonne or more. The hardworking farmers and workers of Rakiraki were anticipating the construction of a new Penang Mill, but to their disappointment, no such announcement was made. Now, the honourable Minister for Sugar is talking about a second-hand mill. We do not know what he is going to say to the farmers after a few months, maybe a third-hand mill.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we as Members of Parliament are the representatives of the people of Fiji. It is our primary duty to echo the wants, hopes, fears, joys and the sorrows of the people whom we all represent, and at this time I wish to assure our supporters that we remain your voice in this Parliament. The sugar industry does not only provide livelihoods to thousands of Fijians, but also drives rural development and supports additional sectors such as transportation, education and agriculture.

In the Fiscal Year 2024-2025, the Ministry of Sugar Industry and Multi-Ethnic Affairs has been allocated a substantial budget of \$76.1 million. While this allocation is commendable, it is imperative that we examine how these funds are utilised to ensure maximum benefit for our sugarcane farmers and their families. The current budget allocates \$66 million for farm development, including subsidies for fertiliser and weedicide, mechanisation support and improvements in cane access roads and drainage systems. These investments are crucial for enhancing cane production efficiency and supporting sustainable agricultural practices. However, there are areas of concern that must be addressed to truly revitalise the sugar industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, firstly the issue of declining cane production remains a significant challenge. From a peak of four million tonnes to the current 1.6 million tonnes, this decline threatens both the economic viability of our farmers and the overall sustainability of the industry. It is essential that we identify and address the root causes of this decline, which include land lease uncertainties, aging farming demographics, poor drainage and inadequate infrastructure. Secondly, while the Government has made efforts to support farmers through initiatives, such as Lease Premium Renewal Assistance Programme, however, more needs to be done to ensure that these programmes are accessible and beneficial to all sugarcane farmers, especially small holders and those in remote areas.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, Sir, recent increases in production costs, such as the rise in cane cartage fees, harvesting and production costs have added further financial strain on our farmers. Fertiliser subsidies of \$20 million is not adequate, and as a result, many farmers are minimising fertiliser usage as hidden costs keep on increasing, and we see cane production on a downward spiral.

In light of these challenges, I urge the Government to reassess its priorities and allocate resources more effectively to support sustainable growth in the sugar industry. This includes not only financial support, but also comprehensive strategies to address issues such as climate change adaptation and mitigation, agricultural innovation and market diversification.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sugar industry holds immense potential to contribute significantly to our nation's economy and social wellbeing. However, realising this potential requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders - Government, industry players and civil society, to work together towards a sustainable and prosperous future for our sugarcane farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the budgetary allocation for people living with special needs is a step towards inclusivity, but it falls short in addressing their comprehensive needs. The Ministry of Education was allocated only \$1,157,000 in Programme 2-3, of which \$1,041,905 is a grant to special schools. While this funding is vital, it is insufficient to meet the broader needs of individuals with special needs.

It is also worth noting that assistance will continue for homes destroyed by accidental fires, with a budget of \$200,000, and for retrofitting homes for people with special needs, with a budget of \$300,000, to enhance accessibility. However, these amounts are minimal per household and may not be adequately address the extensive requirements for making homes and public spaces truly accessible and safe for those with disabilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must ensure that these funds are utilised effectively and reach those who need them the most. The Government must consider broader support mechanisms, such as training programmes, accessible infrastructure and inclusive policies that enable people with special needs to participate fully in society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the budgetary allocation for people with special needs is a step in the right direction, but it is not enough. We need a comprehensive strategy that includes consultations, incentives for employment and broader support mechanisms to ensure that people with special needs can lead fulfilling and independent life.

While this allocation is a step in the right direction, more must be done to ensure that our policies are inclusive and supportive of people living with disabilities and special needs. These individuals face unique challenges in accessing education, healthcare and employment opportunities, which require targeted interventions and support services.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must strengthen our commitment to upholding the rights and dignity of all Fijians, regardless of their abilities or background. This requires a holistic approach that integrates disability rights into mainstream policies and ensure that our communities are inclusive and welcoming for everyone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us reaffirm our commitment to building a society where every individual, including those with disabilities, have the opportunity to thrive and contribute to our nation's development. By investing in their wellbeing and promoting inclusivity, we can build a stronger, more resilient Fiji for generations to come.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as representatives of the people, it is our duty to hold this Government accountable and to advocate for policies that promote fairness, equity and sustainability. Let us work together to address these challenges and to build a future where every Fijian can live with dignity, prosperity and hope.

HON. RATU I. TUIWAILEVU.- The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; let me begin by commending the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics for delivering a well thought-out and healthy Budget. I will be speaking on the increased budget set aside by the Coalition Government for Fiji's culture sector. This, as we all would know, fall under the banner of the Department of Culture, Heritage and Arts.

The annual budget for the sector has increased twice in a row, and this is a symbol of how Government has yet, again, prioritised culture as an important issue for national development. In fact, over the last 10 years, the world has changed in ways that make culture even more relevant to our everyday living and addressing global challenges that impact our communities. Fiji, I can proudly say, is following in this new direction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increase in budget is inspired by policies such as the Fiji National Cultural Policy which will ensure the sector succeeds. The Department of Culture, Heritage and Arts'

budget increased to \$7.8 million in the new financial year. This is \$1.8 million more than the \$5.9 million given in the current financial year. These highlights the significant work required to:

- (1) Promote the heritage of our people.
- (2) Improve museum activities so that our stories are told over and over again.
- (3) Support the development of artists, our artisans and creative arts stakeholders.
- (4) Address the urgency to include culture in our national curriculum so that our children can learn and appreciate our history, our art, our traditions, our indigenous knowledge systems and the many others.
- (5) Establish a data and statistics collection tool to ensure that culture sector contribution to our economic and national development is addressed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the budget for the new financial year 2024-2025 for culture covers a wider range of issues that is beneficial to our key stakeholders and critical to improve the sector.

Grants to our national cultural agencies increased by \$80,000 to \$100,000, which will boost their operations.

The implementation of our National Cultural Policy is a priority for the Department of Culture. Government is setting aside \$350,000 for this work and the development of other cultural frameworks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the first time, \$50,000 will help in a feasibility study to be undertaken to plan for a National Culture and Arts Awards. The award will be a first step to recognising our cultural stakeholders and show gratitude for their contribution to the sector.

The Department of Culture will pilot in four Provincial Council Offices the inclusion of Cultural Project Officers to carry out work of the cultural agencies at the provincial level, so that our services reach villages. This is a first in our history and a total of \$120,000 has been set aside for this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an allocation of \$80,000 has been put aside for review of the cultural agencies structure and legislations, to ensure that our aging cultural institutions become relevant to this day and age.

A new grant scheme, known as "Creative Art Scheme", will be rolled out to provide financial assistance for our artists, artisans and curators so that they can develop their skills and talent. A total of \$50,000 has been allocated for this activity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government is allocating \$3.2 million for capital works in the culture sector and this includes:

- (1) \$1 million set aside for the Department of Culture, Heritage and Arts to support property owners in Levuka Town, whose houses and buildings have suffered greatly over the years due to disasters and climate change and is falling apart.
- (2) A separate \$500,000 is allocated to the National Trust of Fiji to complete the furnishing of the newly renovated Levuka Community Centre.
- (3) A further \$1 million has been set aside for the Fiji Arts Council to begin repair works on the newly established National Art Gallery.
- (4) The Fiji Museum has been allocated \$700,000 to look into the relocation of its collections so that it can make way for the building of a new storage building that will also house a research facility, a library, archives and a laboratory.

Let me assure our residents on the island of Ovalau that our team at the Department are working hard to ensure that assistance will reach other heritage sites that feature on the island.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our budget is a good budget as it supports the bigger work that the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs is doing to promote the socialising of the Fiji National Action Plan for the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and Fiji National Action Plan for International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL).

We also look forward to seeing all Fijians celebrate their cultures and traditions, show respect for one another, achieve economic success, social unity and meaningful co-existence.

I will end by saying that culture is an important component of development, and we must rally our support for our cultural institutions so that they can continue to showcase our unique identity and traditions to the world.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, and those who are viewing this telecast live from the comfort of their home or their office this afternoon; a very good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to also acknowledge those Health Officials who are serving our people diligently all over Fiji. *Ni sa bula vinaka.*

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for this opportunity to address Parliament and my fellow members. I also extend thanks to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics for presenting his second National Budget for the Coalition Government on Friday, 28th June, 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, also allow me this opportunity to thank you most sincerely, for exercising wisdom and maturity, after receiving the termination letter of the G-16+1 Group, all former FijiFirst Members of Parliament on 30th May, 2024. Thank you most sincerely, Sir, for dealing with the matter professionally. Since then, there has been a lot moving parts, both on this side and also on the other side of Parliament. You gave us hope in our hopeless situation. *Vinaka saka vakalevu, Sir.*

On the same breath, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me also acknowledge and thank the honourable Prime Minister. Sir, thank you for taking out your rest time, to come over and meet with some of us in the last weekend. Sir, I thank you and personally appreciate your wise counsel, sharing your experience and advice with us.

Lastly and not the least, I also want to thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for keeping us intact during those dark moments. As a new Member of Parliament, I am still learning, and I thank the God Almighty for His Grace and comfort in those turbulent times. It resonates the *Bible* verse in Romans 8:28: where Apostle Paul wrote, and I quote:

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who are called according to His purpose.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to speak on Health and Medical Services. In my response to the 2024-2025 Budget, it is crucial that I emphasise the importance of health in our nation, Fiji.

The Budget themed, "*Economically Stable, Secure and Sustainable Fiji*", does cover various sectors, but it is worth noting that this security and sustainable growth starts with a healthy Fijian population.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, investment in primary healthcare highlighted in the 2024-2025 fiscal year is, indeed, a commendable and pivotal step towards building a robust and efficient healthcare service in Fiji. I say that with respect that in the health sector, the goal post keep moving. Therefore, as we try to address issues of today, new ailments could rock up to our shores tomorrow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 1995, the Pacific Health Ministers declared the Healthy Island vision in the *Yanuca Island Declaration*. The Healthy Islands concept is envisioned as a place where children are nurtured in body and mind, it promotes an environment for learning and leisure, where people work and age with dignity, where ecological balance is a source of pride and the ocean, which sustains and protects us.

The Healthy Islands concept is a comprehensive and integrated approach to health and wellbeing, first envisioned in 1995 during the Pacific Health Ministers Meeting on Yanuca Island, Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the concept involves continuously identifying and resolving priority issues related to health, health infrastructure development, and the wellbeing of all Fijians. This will be achieved through advocacy, facilitation, and enabling partnership among communities, organisations and agencies at local, national and regional levels.

The approach encourages community participation and ownership, Mr. Speaker, Sir, aiming to create environments that support healthy lifestyles and sustainable development.

Primary Health Care (PHC) is a cornerstone of the Healthy Islands concept. It focuses on providing a comprehensive, accessible, community-based healthcare that meets the health demands of individuals throughout their lives.

Primary healthcare is the first point of contact with healthcare professionals and is also the foundation in maintaining overall health society, communities and a nation.

In prioritising primary healthcare, the Ministry is taking integral steps to improve our general quality of life, prevent disease and manage health conditions at an early stage. This preventative approach can help decrease hospital re-admissions and eventually, lower healthcare costs over time.

Investments in capital and infrastructure developments are crucial in improving the quality of access to health services, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This could include building new health facilities, upgrading existing ones, equipping health centres with adequate medical equipment, medicines, and also compassionate health staff to look after the patient.

At the same time, enhancing technological capabilities for better inventory and patient management. Collectively, Mr. Speaker, Sir, these investments should greatly benefit the Fijian healthcare system, making it more efficient, more inclusive and sustainable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one cannot ignore the efficient allocation of resources and meticulous implementation of policies is a key factor for a tangible benefit. Transparent monitoring and evaluation processes must be set up in the Ministry to ensure that resources are being used as intended and yielding a desired outcome.

While the Government's budget for the health sector in Fiji for the fiscal year 2024-2025 presents some promising elements, as a representative of the Opposition, I cannot overlook the glaring deficiencies and inconsistencies.

Firstly, the Public-Private Partnership driving the \$90 million funding to Ba and Lautoka Aspen Medical Hospitals must be scrutinised further. The role of private players in Aspen Medical in managing the public health resources raises concern about equity in access and affordability of care. While the patient satisfaction mostly excellent customer service, to a state of the art secondary and tertiary level healthcare are being enjoyed by the people of Lautoka and Ba, the remaining paper works in this business dealing must be completed. It is the Coalition Government's responsibility to do it for us, and also provide transparency to the taxpayers and the general public.

Mr. Speaker sir, I declare my interest in the Free Healthcare Scheme under the General and Dental Practitioner initiative. These private dental practitioners play a crucial role in improving the oral health of all Fijians:

- (a) **Accessibility and Availability:** These clinics are flexible hours compared to public clinics, making it easier for patients to get timely care.
- (b) **Range of Services:** They offer a wider range of treatments, including advanced procedures that might not be available in public clinics.
- (c) **Quality of Care:** Private practitioners often have access to the latest dental technologies and materials, which can lead to better treatment outcomes.
- (d) **Preventive Care:** They emphasize preventive care, such as regular check-ups and cleanings, which helps in early detection and management of dental issues.
- (e) **Patient Education:** Private dentists often spend more time educating patients about oral hygiene practices, which can lead to better long-term oral health.
- (f) **Overall,** private dental practitioners enhance the quality and accessibility of dental care, contributing significantly to the oral health of Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I call on the honourable Prime Minister and the Coalition Government to expand these services to the Northern, Eastern and Western Divisions. Now, despite the expression of interest by my dental colleagues, the Ministry of Finance has been very ineffective with their communications. It is a great programme that relieves the burden on our public health sector, reduces waiting time, and better quality of service provided to vulnerable Fijians.

Furthermore Mr. Speaker, although the Ministry's overall capital expenditure has decreased, we should be cautious and be responsible with our dwindling resources. The \$2.3 million decrease in funds for bio-medical equipment. Cutting corners on essential biological and technical resources is not advisable, especially when the supply chain remain a challenge globally.

In moving on Mr. Speaker, Sir, a decrease of \$400,000 for the upgrade of Sub-Divisional Hospitals, Health Centres and Nursing Stations and a cut by another \$400,000 on dental equipment purchases is equally concerning. These reductions may lead to compromised delivery of essential healthcare services to our Fijian population.

Moving further, the funding of \$1 million for ICT infrastructure and network, a slight increase from the previous year, still appears a worthless sum given the rapid medical advancement of our time.

Turning to the SDG-related budget allocation, again the commitment towards SDG3 is creditable, however, preventative healthcare funding needs to be adequate and effective.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Non-Communicable Disease (NCDs) are a heavyweight challenge in Fiji health system, yet the allocated budget of \$350,000 for NCD prevention and control seems disproportionately small, given the gravity of NCDs in Fiji.

Lastly, the Budget does not reflect the urgency of mental health issues currently plaguing our communities. This glaring omission fails to factor in the skyrocketing mental health issues and their profound impact on individuals and families.

On a positive note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my view, the health care budget for the Fiscal Year 2024-2025, while displaying some strong needs to be improved, for us to truly move towards a healthier and a well-served Fijian, we need a budget that is equitable, efficient and forward looking, representing all Fijians, leaving no one behind. We cannot afford to only favour urban over the rural, rich over the poor or physical health over mental health; all aspects must be catered for in our collective pursuit for a healthier Fiji. Mr. Speaker, Sir, all in all, the Ministry's priorities and budget allocations for this fiscal year shows a strong commitment to building a robust, sustainable and accessible health care system for all Fijians.

With the rise in salary for civil servants, which includes health workers, I hope that it will also change the attitude towards how they look after their patients. The focus on primary health care is somewhat appropriate ensuring disease prevention, better health outcome and emphasising on infrastructure development, which will really help the health facility to better equip to deliver their service. For years now, we have been focusing on NCDs in almost all of our previous national budget announcements, but we also need to ask ourselves, whether our efforts in dealing with NCDs are making an impact? If not, what do we do about it?

In summary, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services 2024-2025 Budget responds well to both the immediate needs for infrastructure and health service improvements, as well as the long term Sustainable Development Goals. It showcases the balanced importance of investing in prevention measures as well as in treatment, facilities and services. Despite the budget cutbacks in certain areas, this detailed budget plan indicates a strategic direction towards moving into the overall health care sector in Fiji for the fiscal year 2024-2025.

Before I resume my seat, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also want to join my colleagues in congratulating the honourable Alitia Bainivalu, the Chairperson for the Standing Committee on Social Affairs for ascending to the portfolio of becoming the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry - a first female in the history. *Sa vakauinui vinaka*, Madam. I also thank and welcome the Attorney-General and thank him for accepting the honourable Prime Minister's invitation to be with us in this august Parliament. I wish him well, Sir, in his tenure.

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and fellow citizens, *ni sa bula vinaka*. I thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics for the progressive, well-planned and well-articulated 2024-2025 Budget. I will present my response to compliment the response that was presented by the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways earlier this morning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is aimed to:

- protect our children, youth and elderly;
- enhance participation and involvement of women and youth in the agriculture sector;
- reduce urban drift;

- generate environmentally friendly or green jobs that will support Fiji's overall economic stability; and
- boost the agricultural sector's contribution to Fiji's economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the allocated budget is focussed on ensuring Food and Nutrition Security to all Fijians. The Ministry will continue to accelerate the process of transitioning smallholder farmers to a commercial level. The Ministry is committed to progressing the development and use of Good Agricultural Practices for semi commercial and commercial production.

The Land Resource Planning Division, Mr. Speaker, Sir, land is the foundation of agriculture development, and the Ministry appreciates the Land Resource Planning budget of \$1.3 million, a 136 percent increase from the current budget. This Division will lead the planned review of ALTA with the Ministry of Lands and will continue to implement eco-friendly practices such as sustainable land management, climate-smart agriculture technology and farm management advisory.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Crop Extension Division is allocated with \$23.2 million, where \$14.7 million is designated for Capital Programmes and \$6.8 million for Operational Expenses.

Mechanization plays a key role in increasing production, enabling farmers to achieve higher yields efficiently and sustainably. This budget includes cushioning the cost of fertilizer and weedicide, hiring of machines on an hourly basis and the purchase of machines for those who wish to own a tractor, digger, rice harvester or bulldozer. Furthermore, it also supports export promotion programmes such as *dalo*, *yaqona*, ginger, turmeric and coconut. Consequently, in this budget, it supports activities that will add value to raw agricultural products such as processing of cassava into cassava flour, or cassava starch and other agricultural products.

Agriculture Research, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Research Division is allocated with \$12.7 million where \$5.5 million is designated for Capital Programmes and \$6.1 million for Operating Expenses. Research innovation is key to agricultural development. Funds will be distributed amongst 22 capital programmes such as providing quality seeds and planting material, pest and diseases control, genetic plant improvement, soil improvement and creating awareness and mitigation activities to reduce the severity of Kava Die Back in the sector. Furthermore, to improve levels of efficiency, research stations will be upgraded.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Animal Health & Production Division is allocated \$21.1 million, where \$15.4 million designated for Capital Programmes and \$5.7 million for Operating Expenses. The funds will be distributed among the four geographical Divisions to aid in the advancement of our Extension and Research initiatives for the production of goats, beef, dairy, sheep, poultry, pigs and apiculture, as well as veterinary and regulatory programmes.

This Animal Disease Eradication and Control Programmes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the ongoing programme to eradicate brucellosis and tuberculosis aims to control the two main zoonotic diseases that impacts cattle population in Fiji. The Ministry has made substantial progress in decreasing the prevalence of these two diseases through ongoing testing. A budget of \$1.6 million has been allocated for control of these two diseases.

The Ministry has made substantial progress in decreasing the prevalence of these two diseases through ongoing testing. A Budget of \$1.6 million has been allocated for controlling these two diseases.

The Ministry will continue monitoring other diseases in Fiji and provide the required services to minimise losses of production from pests and diseases.

For diary, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2023 nearly \$90 million in dairy products were imported for local consumption. To help the local dairy industry, \$4.5 million has been allocated to support dairy farmers.

The Fiji Co-operative Dairy Company Limited (FCDCL) has been allocated a sum of \$4 million. This will enable FCDCL to offer milk price incentives, raw milk cartage subsidy, livestock feed subsidy, develop farm infrastructure, capacity building and hire of veterinary consultant and dairy advisory officers.

During the financial year, a favourable result was noted due to the rise in budget allocation to FCDCL. The total amount of milk supplied in the formal sector has resulted in a 10 percent increase in the third quarter of 2023-2024 financial year.

The Dairy Extension Programme assistance will include:

- (1) provision of dairy sheds;
- (2) improvement to farm roads; and
- (3) training for aspiring dairy farmers at the Navuso Agriculture Technical Institute.

Stray Animal Control Campaign, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry continuously receive complaints on stray animals including cattle, horses, goats and sheep for causing considerable damage to crop farms, disrupting traffic and increasing the risk of vehicle accidents. Sir, between January and June of this year, a total of 410 animals have been captured.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to also raise in this Parliament that stray dogs control has been a major component of this budgeted allocation. I say this because the growth of sheep and the goat industry had been limited by the severity of dog attacks on farms.

Waterways, we have a number of programmes that been funded by the Waterways Division. We have a total \$23.3 million and \$16.6 million designated for Capital Programmes and \$3.5 million for Operating Expenses.

Their programmes include:

- (1) Watershed Management, Land Drainage and Flood Protection;
- (2) Coastal Erosion Protection;
- (3) Drainage for Farmland/Rural Residential Programme; and
- (4) Irrigation Support Programme.

Mr. Speaker, to conclude, this Budget supports MDGs, it supports sustainability of land and food systems, and it supports food and nutrition security and it generates income. his Budget is relevant and timely. It will offer assistance to our rural population who are in urgent need and solutions for their current challenges.

On that note, I urge all honourable Members of Parliament to join me in supporting this Budget.

HON. T.R. MATASAWALEVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the leaf of the story of Joseph when his brothers finally realised that he was second in command in the land of Egypt at the time of famine, they were ashamed to face him. Joseph stood upright and said to them, “what you meant for evil, God meant it for good.”

Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition and the honourable Members of Parliament, to the people of Fiji and all Fijians watching the live broadcast and those present in the gallery this evening, *ni sa bula vinaka*.

From the land, one river, one bus, one people, I stand before you to give my Budget Response for the 2024-2025 Budget. Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for the opportunity in allowing me to express my view and be the voice of the people of Northland, Tailevu; Nakorotubu, Nalawa and Saivou, in Ra.

Ni sa bula vinaka saka na Turaga Na i Liuliu ni noda Vale ni Bose Lawa, ni bula vinaá na Turaga Na i Liuliu ni noda Matanitu, na Turaga Prime Minister, kei na Mata Digitaki eda tikora saka tiko na dadedabe vaka Bose lawa.

Au via vakabula saka kina na noda yasana e 14, ki Kubuna vua na Gone Turaga na Vunivalu, ki Burebasaga vua saka na Gone Marama na Roko Tui Dreketi kei na Bui ni masi e va, na Matanitu qaqa na Tovota.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to highlight a few critical issues that the people I represent wish to highlight in this august Parliament. Mr. Speaker, the coastal road from Nakorotubu in Ra needs serious attention. This is in particular the stretch from Mataso to Naocobau. I hope the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport has sufficient funding in this Budget to fix this road, just like the roads around Tailevu South and the *Bucabuca* of Burebasaga.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while I am on the need on roads to be fixed and upgraded, I wish to highlight a related issue of poor bus service. Sir, this is a very, very poor bus service. Bus operators have buses coming very early in morning and returning very late at night to the constituency that I have visited. I hope that the Minister for Finance this time around is innovative and would relieve the bus operators from overhead costs which the services can be frequent, particularly for the people along the coast of Nakorotubu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I request the honourable Minister to take the time off and drive down to Veidrala Village in the *Tikina* of Nakorotubu and witness for himself that this these roads need serious upgrading.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I ask the honourable Prime Minister if he can direct the Minister responsible, to extend the EFL power grid for the people in Namarai Village to Nadavacia Village in Nakorotubu, Ra.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a dramatic shift of mindset with our farmers. If farmers can be assisted with heavy farming machinery, such as a digger to assist them in cultivating their land and make that big shift from subsistence farming to commercial farming.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, I wish to thank the honourable Prime Minister for the provision of remembering the decades cry of the workers from our Mines in Vatukoula. As a Member of Parliament who is making a plea in this august Parliament, I hope that the honourable Prime Minister is listening to all that I have said in this Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for the increased allocation for our youth, particularly at a time when we are being challenged with lots of youth-related issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the 2024-2025 Budget, however, if the issues I have raised earlier could be addressed accordingly, that would surely be an excellent compliment to this contribution of mine. *Qaqa saka tiko na veiliutaki ena vanua o Navatu.* May God bless Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- *Vinaka vakalevu, honourable Rokomatu. Sa dua na batinisiwa vakaitamera dou sa baci biuta qori.*

(Laughter)

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, Members of this august Parliament; I fully support the 2024-2025 Budget because of what it reflects - the stability, security and sustainability of our economy.

The Ministry of Justice is entrusted with the oversight of the administration of justice. The Budget utilisation for the Ministry for 2023-2024 is 85 percent. The Coalition Government, again, has demonstrated its long term commitment for the people of Fiji.

I say this Mr. Speaker, Sir, in what is reflected in the Budget in terms of resolving one of the longstanding strikes of 33 years to the people of Vatukoula. I joined the Civil Service in 1991 at the time of the strike and to see the gratitude and appreciation expressed by the Vatukoula community, it touches my heart, and I am sure it touches every heart. I only wonder if the FijiFirst Government had a heart similar to that of the Coalition Government.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- I also applaud the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics and the Coalition Government in terms of resolving or caring for its civil servants by addressing one of the long pending issues in terms of pay increase for our civil servants.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Civil Service week, we pledge the people of Fiji that we value their work and we will continue to do so. Thank you, honourable Prime Minister, for the Programme last week, particularly in hosting the Permanent Secretaries on Friday.

I can see the Budget support rendered to our roads in the rural areas and outer islands which enables the accessibility of our people. The island of Ovalau, Koro and Gau eargerly awaits the opening of the Public Works Department in Levuka in terms of improving road infrastructure long forgotten by the de-registered FijiFirst Party.

I fully support the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration in terms of the National Narcotics Strategy. The Ministry of Justice will work closely and lend its support to the work of the Narcotics Bureau and other relevant stakeholders to ensure that the future generations of Fiji are safe from the scourge of drug trade and drug abuse.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Justice plays a pivotal role in delivering its essential services through its primary Legal Registries that manages document registration, official records maintenance and legal documentation. Key responsibilities include overseeing the Registrar of Titles, Registrar of Companies, Birth, Deaths and Marriages Office (OBDM), Official Receiver's Office and the Administration of Justice of Peace Services.

Since the beginning of this year, the Ministry of Justice has undertaken significant changes with strong focus on enhancing operational processes. The Corporate Team has been encouraged to adopt the process of continuous improvement, emphasising the following models:

- (1) Identify opportunities, recognising areas within their work and methodologies that can be enhanced and streamlined.
- (2) Planning - devote strategies and action plan to implement improvements effectively.
- (3) Implementation - execute the plan improvements in a structured and systematic manner.
- (4) Evaluation - to assess the outcomes and impact of the implemented changes,
- (5) Adjust - make necessary adjustments based on evaluation feedback for further refined and optimised processes.

These modules of continuous improvement encourage ongoing refinement and innovation in work methodologies, aiming to achieve greater efficiency, effectiveness and quality in the corporate team operations.

The key initiative currently underway is the development of a strategic development plan for the next five years. This plan aims to systematically improve the Ministry's effective functionality and efficiency ensuring better service delivery and overall effectiveness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this initiative ensures that all Divisions in the ministry are focused on the Coalition Government initiatives of ease of business and in line with the National Development Plan (NDP).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Justice has been allocated a total budget of \$6 million for the fiscal year 2024-2025. This allocation underscores the significant commitment to upholding the rule of law, the reinforcing of foundation aspects of the nation's legal framework. This is a transformative leap in a commitment to reinforcing justice, improving service delivery and ensuring prevalence of the rule of law nationwide.

Notably, our operational budget has surged from the \$4 million to \$5 million, reflecting an increase of \$1,043,000 million. This heightened funding underscores the strategic priorities and unwavering support to tackle enduring challenge within our justice system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of digitalisation, we acknowledge the critical need for modernisation. We have allocated \$100,000 towards the digitalisation project. This initiative aims to streamline operations and improve service delivery through adoption of digital technologies.

The Ministry has initiated the groundwork for the digitalisation of Registrar of Titles, supported by technical assistance from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and guided by a scoping consultant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, addressing the challenges posed by money laundering and terrorist financing is critical due to their complex and evolving nature. Criminal organisations exploit the vulnerabilities of the financial system, posing risks to both economic stability and societal wellbeing.

To counteract this, we are making a strategic investment in the Asia Pacific Group (APG) Money Laundering Subscription. Our commitment extends to the strengthening and regulatory framework, ensuring rigorous oversight compliance with international standards.

The implementation of recommendations from the Financial Action Taskforce is pivotal in enhancing transparency and accountability across financial transactions. The APG provides

additional technical assistance, aimed at improving our non-profit sector through risks based approach.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, moving forward, we remain dedicated to collaboration with international partners and organisations to bolster our technical capabilities in detecting and preventing money laundering and terrorist financing.

Public awareness plays a pivotal role in combating these illicit activities. To this end, we will launch educational campaigns and the increasing awareness amongst citizens, businesses, non-profit organisations about their crucial roles and responsibilities in preventing money laundering and terrorist financing

I wish to inform this august Parliament that various initiatives are undertaken by the Fiji Corrections Service. The Coalition Government has taken a positive approach in rehabilitation of our sons, daughters, uncles, aunties and grandparents cared for by the Fiji Corrections Service as reflected in the increase in 2024-2025 Budget of \$57.8 million.

The Fiji Corrections Service intends to empower staff by creating an environment where staff may participate in the decision-making process. To achieve this, the Fiji Corrections Service deliberately and intentionally adopted a democratic decision-making process by having a Board and Committees to deliberate and discuss pertinent issues affecting the operation of Fiji Corrections Service. Members of this Board are drawn from the staff, however, the recommendation of the Committee and Board will require the endorsement of Commissioner before implementation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Corrections Service undertake other initiatives, such as the establishment of the Fiji Parole Board, review of the commercialisation Prison Enterprise, the digitalisation of prisoners and staff records, the review of the Rehabilitation Framework, particularly Yellow Ribbon, and staff training and resources.

The Fijian Elections Office budget of \$7.4 million is provided for the operations of the Fijian Elections Office for the next financial year. This office is responsible for the independent preparation and conduct of national elections of Parliament every four years and other elections assigned under the law.

The Electoral Commission constitutes as an independent non-partisan authority that has the responsibility of the registration of voters and the conduct of a free and fair election in accordance with the written laws governing elections in Fiji. I acknowledge them for their hard work and sacrifice to ensure our electoral laws, administration are transparent, efficient, effective and truly represent the views of the people.

I have been advised that the Electoral Commission faces a lot of challenges in terms of administrative support. I understand that these challenges are the direct outcome of administration hangover from the previous government. The challenges facing them is unfortunate. As line Minister, it is my desire to resolve these challenges soon. If anything, the Electoral Commission and the Fijian Elections Office should and ought to work in tandem and complement each other.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I may conclude, this Budget underscores our unwavering commitment to build a justice system that is equitable, accessible and responsive to the needs of our citizens. Within this Budget, our job is clear. We are committed to addressing the deficiency of our justice system.

We are investing in personnel and enhancing our operational framework and restoring public trust. Together, the objective is to establish a justice system that is fair, efficient and accessible to all. This ensures that every citizen can trust the rule of law and to protect their rights and uphold justice proactively. Philippians 4:13 states and I quote, “I can do all this through Him who gives me strength.” May God bless Fiji. I fully support the 2024-2025 Budget.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the hononourable Prime Minister, the honourable Attorney-General, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, members in the gallery and thousands of Fijians who have tuned in today; *ni sa bula, Salaam Alay Kum, Namaste* and a very good evening to you all.

I want to provide my response to the 2024-2025 National Budget. I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to the team from the Ministry of Finance led by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, and various stakeholders for their hard work in compiling this Budget. After a critical examination of this Budget, I have several recommendations in moving forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to begin with, the road fatalities in Fiji has been surging with 44 cases in 2022, 78 cases in 2023 and 24 cases in 2024, and there is a great urgency to combat this issue. One of the recommendations I have already discussed with the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport as well is the need for more speed cameras for speed detection, mobile phone usage, seatbelt detection and red-light offences. This will penalise those who commit these offences, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and we also need to relook at how the new driver’s licence is being issued as well because we cannot afford to lose more lives on our roads.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Viria Water Project has kicked off and has stated by the honourable Minister, it will deliver up to 360 households as intended in part of Suva, so I hope in the future, we do not have water cuts experienced by areas and households in the Suva and Nausori corridor.

I also would like to thank honourable Tuinaceva and the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport for attending an urgent issue in one of the settlements in Naitasiri and fixing the road issue. So, thank you honourable Minister for your prompt response.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I turn my attention, to Local Government, we have the Naboro Landfill that receives up to 184 tonnes of waste per day and 80 percent is organic. But there is currently no large scale processing of organic waste that turns into organic fertilizers. So, one of the future recommendations is for Government to implement measures that ensures households to separate organic and non-organic waste, allocate budget for waste collection trucks and processing facilities that turn this organic matter into organic fertilizers which is shred and composted. There is a process where it can be provided to our Fijian farmers to boost organic agriculture in Fiji, boost GDP and improve environmental sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, last year in this august Parliament, I asked the question, can the honourable Minister be the owner of a company that deals with the buying and selling of beche-de-mer? Sir, today we see a change in the ministerial position, and I would like to congratulate, honourable Bainivalu for her new position, actually deserving. Congratulations, honourable Minister, for your new role.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my personal recommendation for the Ministry of Agriculture was \$100 million and I am glad to see an allocation of \$101.2 million. The personal goal for this country is to make agriculture the backbone of this nation by my retirement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, turning my attention to climate change, I would like to acknowledge the significant process that the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change has made in the last six months. I know from media articles that they have secured US\$5.7 million from the Adaptation Fund for Nature Based Solutions. They have secured \$295,000 for COP29 from the Adaptation Ambition Support Alliance and almost half a million have been secured from the Climate Technology Centre for the agriculture sector. I would also like to share with this august Parliament that I am aware of a proposal designed for Fiji's agriculture sector and I have been informed it is being led by FAO, and it is up to a US\$44 million. There is another oceans economy proposal in a similar value, led in partnership with WWF.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must acknowledge the leadership of young and innovative thinkers who have hands-on technical expertise to do great for our nation. But, while this good work is being noted, I am curious to learn why the Ministry is only given \$500,000 for the implementation of the Climate Change Act. The fact that this legislation will govern the work of the Ministry against the little funding allocated, is quite critical.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I turn my attention to the grassroots, there are over 200 informal settlements in Fiji. We need to formalise settlements, we need to empower people out of the squatter settlements and we need to continue renewing leases and provide them with lands so they can build and cultivate their livelihoods. Currently, \$171.1 million is spent on social protection programmes, and majority of the recipients are from rural, marginalised and vulnerable communities. When we give people their sense of ownership of land in terms of leasing land, they aspire to build their homes, they aspire to build a garage, they aspire to buy a vehicle, and this generates economic activity right at the grassroot level, and this is going to help our GDP in growing forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with resourced landowners, landowners in Fiji are resource rich and we need to empower them to be financially rich and wealthy with an approach of providing them with equity and shares and have a seat at the table to have their voices heard when negotiating with investors. We should amend laws that allow the Government to backup and acquire resource development projects.

More than 50 percent of the projects economic benefit should flow to the people of Fiji, where it is landowners' estate and locally owned industries. We should get majority of the cash flow because the resources are owned by us. Honourable Prime Minister, I am calling for a transformative change in going forward. As legislators, we need to convert assistance to initiatives of empowerment through such action for our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I turn my attention to the Ministry of Education, the Back-to-School \$200 support per child, there has been some cases of funds being misused. This needs monitoring and reporting of how the funds were used, because no child in this country should be left behind.

On a matter of drugs, our youngsters are exposed to drugs like methamphetamine, marijuana and cocaine. There has been cases of violent and aggressive behaviour, students fighting in schools and at the bus stands, and there is a very worrying issue where a student has punched a school teacher. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to boost parental responsibility towards their children, to safeguard and promote the child's health, education, development and welfare, and parents are requested to monitor the smart phones and social media usage by their kids.

Parents need to be informed about their children's whereabouts because if you do not, you will make the front pages of the media articles with your name, and I believe that is quite embarrassing. I urge the honourable Attorney-General to look at laws in the areas of children using

social media, securing our network, drug use and violent and aggressive behaviour in schools, and I urge the Government to restore discipline in our schools like it used to be in our times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to clear the air for the public, in terms of social media, there has been a fake profile using my name, my credentials, impersonating me, and is requesting people for trade and it is basically a scam. Despite reporting the account to Facebook several times, it has done nothing. So, that goes to show how vulnerable we are to the platform of the virtual world. I commend the Budget for allocating \$2 million to the Fiji Counter Narcotics Bureau; the drug problem is everyone's problem.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on TELS, one of the major recommendations from the students was to increase the students' allowances. Another surprise factor in the Budget was the allocation to Pacific Polytech from \$1 million to \$5 million, and that is raising a lot of questions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I like to turn my attention to my favourite Ministry, the Ministry of Finance now. I have urged the Government several times in Parliament to fulfil their hundred day promise to increase the National Minimum Wages to \$5 and their promise have come after 24 months, well it will be April next year.

Mr. Speaker. Sir, I would like to respond to the honourable Minister for Productivity, Employment and Industrial Relations, I would like to tell him that the FijiFirst Government or the previous government had introduced the National Minimum Wages. He was in the union back then, he could have done it, but they did not do it. People are also waiting on the query on the ferris wheel incident.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I applaud the Government for the increment to civil servants' wages; that was truly deserving.

I like to turn my attention to the MSMEs. Fiji's growth, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was projected to slow down by 3 percent in 2024 and by 2.7 in 2025 as stated by the ADB. The honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade goes on to say that 18 percent of the GDP is contributed by MSMEs and he wants to take it up to 30 percent in the next five to ten years but the honourable Deputy Prime Minister has a huge obstacle in his part and I did share it with him. His huge obstacle is the honourable Minister for Finance because the honourable Minister has gone and said that the businesses need to absorb the increment of wages and absorb the increment of VAT. A business will transfer the high taxation cost to its consumers, reduce hours of their staff and send some of their staff home and that is the reality on the ground.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the cost of zero-rated items at 22 and in this Budget it was expected to go up to 30. The honourable Finance Minister believes in raising taxes to get Government income. He has labelled the Government as a responsible one, VAT has increased from 9 percent to 15 percent, Corporate Tax is 25 percent. Is this a responsible Government?

There is a reduction in threshold from \$2,000 to \$1,000 and 15 percent VAT is applicable. Is this a responsible Government?

This is a big Government. Everyone is a Minister and Assistant Minister - huge operating expense. Is this a responsible Government?

Over 100,000 people have left Fiji; loss of human capital, there is brain-drain and this has had profound impact on our economy, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Is this a responsible Government?

They are taxing Non-Profit Organisations that look after the vulnerable, marginalised and the grassroots. Is this a responsible Government?

The so-called People's Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, accepted submissions for the Budget but the honourable Minister for Finance did not go out to do a nationwide public budget consultation. He did not hear the voices of the public. Is this a responsible Government?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they need to understand Fiji's GDP grew up to 20 percent in 2022. The Coalition Government was left in a very economically sound position, so why borrow more money when you have increased taxes?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, debt is up to \$10.9 billion. Debt to GDP ratio is \$77.8 million but the price of bread has gone up, VAT is imposed on butter, it is a bread and butter issue. Is this a responsible Government?

To the rest of the Coalition Ministers, SODELPA and PAP, for the next elections you will be defending his economic policies. That is the truth, you will be defending his economic policies and you will be answerable to the people; deficit budget, increase debts, increase spending, borrow more, sit and hope and pray there is no natural disaster, irresponsible government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge the honourable Prime Minister to ask serious questions to his Minister for Finance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, ratification of issues is imperative because every issue in this country comes at a cost and that cost is to Government.

There are possibilities of reshuffle and change. As I know, the honourable Prime Minister has a lot of options now and he is smiling away.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, why focus on paying the debt when you can focus on increasing the GDP, empower the grassroots, renew leases, formalise settlements and make agriculture and fisheries the primary backbone of this country. The goal is massive, the challenges are massive, and it rests upon our shoulders to take action.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I started by political career under the FijiFirst banner with 1,705 votes as a newcomer. This was unexpected for me. I have nothing but respect for those who once graced this august Chambers and who are here today. Fiji's political landscape has gone through challenging times, but I assure the people of this nation and over voters to remain positive and hopeful.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I serve as an independent Member for the best interest of this nation, Mr. Speaker, Sir. No matter what Party you are from, you must be for Fiji and for every Fijian. Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we go forward in supporting the honourable Prime Minister in scrutinising where we need to as Members of Parliament, but we want the best for this nation. We all hold the power to be a catalyst for the change we need, that is when we can call a stable, secure and sustainable Fiji, a Fiji for all. God bless Fiji.

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, fellow citizens of Fiji, *ni sa bula vina'a* and a very good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to make my contribution to the motion that is before Parliament which is the Debate on the 2024-2025 Annual Budget. At the outset, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to take this time to congratulate the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Planning and Development and his team at the Ministry of Finance for a very well-thought and well-articulated Budget. On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to congratulate the honourable Graham Leung and honourable Alitia Bainivalu on their appointments as Attorney-General and Minister for Fisheries and Forestry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Home Affairs in this upcoming financial year has been allocated a total of \$21.4 million. Out of the \$21.4 million, the Department of Immigration has got the largest chunk of \$14.9 million which is an increase compared to \$8.7 million in the last fiscal year. This is a reflection of the Government's commitment to fostering a robust, efficient and fair immigration system to our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I proceed, I also wish to commend the staff, the men and women of the Immigration Department for their work. The Department manages the movement of people at our borders, its key function of sustaining border management and security are operationalised through the delivery of essential immigration services including issuing visas and permits, travel documents, citizenship and enforcing immigration laws and regulations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department will continue its work on the several critical initiatives in the coming financial year and this includes:

- (1) Document management system;
- (2) Enhancing of document management and security of immigration related documents;
- (3) Outsourcing of immigration administrative services; and
- (4) Passenger information system.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department will continue to address the findings and recommendations of the Growth Reset Sub-Committee on Immigration Investment, ensuring that our Immigration policies support economic growth and development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on investment and infrastructure and technology, the Budget allocates substantial resource towards state-of-the-art infrastructure which is crucial for ensuring the efficient processing of applications and the seamless movement of individuals across our borders. Therefore, significant investments will be made in upgrading our Immigration offices, implementing advance technology systems and enhancing our border security measures. This modernisation Mr. Speaker, Sir, will not only expedite processing times but also ensure that our immigration system is resilient and responsive to challenges of the 21st Century.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on enhanced training and staffing, to complement these infrastructural improvements, we are also prioritising the training and staffing of our immigration services. The Budget includes provisions for recruiting additional personnel and providing comprehensive training programmes and for this, I wish to thank the honourable Minister for Finance for the approval from the Ministry of Finance. This initiative aims to equip our Immigration Officers with the skills and knowledge required to handle the complexities of modern immigration issues efficiently and compassionately. A well trained and adequately staffed immigration workforce is essential for maintaining the integrity and effectiveness of our Immigration system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on support for integration as settlement services, the Government recognises the importance of integration and settlement services. The Budget allocates funds to support programmes that assist new immigrants in adapting to life in our country. These programmes will

focus on providing language training, employment assistance and cultural orientation ensuring that newcomers can integrate successfully and contribute positively to our society. We believe that investing in the successful integration of immigrants is an investment in the future prosperity and social cohesion of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on streamlining administrative processes. In line with our commitment to efficiency and transparency, the Budget includes measures to streamline administrative processes within the Immigration Department. This involves the implementation of a standardised national outsourcing administrative service restructure applicable both domestically and internationally. By standardising these fees, we aim to create a fair and transparent system that facilitates smoother and more predictable interactions for all our applicants whether they are seeking visas, residency or citizenship.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on enhanced border security, the safety and security of our borders remain a top priority. The Budget provides for enhanced border and security measures including the deployment of advanced surveillance technologies and the strengthening of our border patrol units. These efforts are crucial in safeguarding our nation from illegal activities while ensuring that legitimate travellers and immigrants are processed efficiently.

On addressing humanitarian needs, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Immigration Policy must also reflect our humanitarian values. On 20th June, 2024, Fiji celebrated World Refugee Day; the first to be held in Fiji and the region. In collaboration with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the Department has developed joint procedures for assessing refugee claims ensuring fairness and efficiency in our asylum process. We eagerly anticipate endorsing the refugee status determination Standard Operating Procedures, a testament to our collaborative efforts in refining operational frameworks for the benefit of refugees.

To date, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) kind support, we are steadily progressing towards the formulation of Fiji's first ever Refugee Policy. We will continue to work closely with international organisations and partners to ensure that those fleeing persecution and conflict find a safe haven in our country upholding our international obligations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the review of Immigration legislation, I have addressed this in Parliament, the review of our Immigration legislation is in its preliminary stages. We extend our gratitude to our donor partners; International Organisation of Migration for their technical support and assistance.

There are some notable announcements in the Budget, and I wish to highlight some of these and I am very fortunate that it has been highlighted in the Budget. Firstly, the \$200 assistance Back-to-School grant. This has been well received in our communities. I have been going across to some of the villages back in Vanua Levu, they have been well received as this has been really helpful to them in preparation for school.

Secondly, the continuous support from the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development with regards to Rural Housing. The honourable Minister has announced it, and we are thankful for this as this has really helped our rural communities especially in our villages for those who are seeking rural housing assistance.

Thirdly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this can also be a timely increase in salary and wages of our civil servants which I believe is well deserving. This has been a much needed incentive given the work that the civil servants has provided to our country.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the energy and electricity sector, as announced by the honourable Minister, a sum of \$3 million is welcomed for the implementation of solar home system and this is very welcomed in rural areas especially in the villages in Vanua Levu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my leave, I wish to say that the budget of \$14.9 million allocation for Immigration in 2024-2025 is a testament to our dedication to building a modern, efficient and compassionate immigration system. By investing in infrastructure, staffing, integration services and security measures, we are laying the groundwork for a system that not only meets the needs of today but is also prepared for the challenges of tomorrow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us move forward with confidence, knowing that these investments will strengthen our nation, enrich our communities and uphold the values that define us as a society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the Budget and I thank you for your indulgence.

HON. A.N. TUICOLO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, fellow citizens here in the gallery and those joining us from the comforts of their homes via livestreaming; I rise to contribute briefly on the 2024-2025 Appropriation Bill 2024 that is before Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand here to thank you, Sir, for allowing me this opportunity to be able to represent my voters, once again, as an Independent Member of this august Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I, too, would like to congratulate our new Attorney- General, honourable Leung, and our new Minister for Fisheries and Forestry, honourable Bainivalu, in taking up their new leadership role.

At the outset, I wish to thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics for his Budget Address. Although, we do not see much change, but we thank his Ministry, the Permanent Secretary for Finance and his hardworking team, for the compilation of the 2024-2025 Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to the Reserve Bank of Fiji's Economic Review, dated April 2024, the Fiji economy is projected to return to the growth trend following the strong post pandemic recovery in the last two years. According to RBF's latest Business Expectations Survey (BES) most businesses anticipate an improvement in general business conditions over the next six months to twelve months.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have gone past challenging times, and with divine power and past decisive leadership, we are able to reach this far. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is only proper that we look ahead and deal with situations before us. Dwelling on the past means reading the same chapter over and over again, while expecting the ending to change. Dwelling on the past is the biggest roadblock from moving forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the preparation of any budget, whether it be personal or a business budget, we are always interested in how much money we make, how much we spend and, most importantly, how much we save for any rainy day.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, like many ordinary citizens, I am more interested in the total revenue collection offset by the total Government Expenditures. I noted that in the Fiscal Year 2022-2023, the actual Tax Revenue was \$2.2 million, compared to the expected Tax revenue to be \$3 million for

the Fiscal Year 2023-2024. I believe that the increase in tax revenue is the result of the implementation of the 6 percent VAT levied on goods and services.

We continue to depend on direct and indirect taxes revenue. Are there plans in the pipeline in finding other alternative sources of revenue for the economy? The Government must seriously look into this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the number of initiatives introduced by the Coalition Government, I wish to highlight a few of these initiatives introduced in the forthcoming financial year, that directly benefits ordinary citizens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the increase in the National Minimum Wage to \$5 per hour in a two-phase approach, I thank the Coalition Government for honouring one of their promises and that is, to increase the National Minimum Wage rate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the inadequate pay increase that has caused public uproar, I believe more work must be done in terms of consultation and awareness. Sir, what many do not understand is that whenever there is an increase in the National Minimum Wage rate, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are the very ones that will feel the pinch.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a way forward would be to regroup each businesses according to their revenue streams and calculate a sectorial minimum wage rate for the respective sectors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the Coalition Government for the continuation of the Back-to-School support. With the disbursement of this financial support at the beginning of the 2025 academic year, it will, no doubt, assist families towards the preparation of the new academic year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to thank the Coalition Government for reaching a resolution and allocating \$9.2 million in settlement to families of around 368 Vatukoula Mine workers. Although this would be an additional cost to taxpayers, I fully support this funding as it would bring major relief to the families of these workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, illicit drugs has become a growing cause of concern in Fiji. It is affecting our Fijian children and youth today. The whole community can be affected by the negative impacts associated with illicit drug use, such as an increase risk of harm to children and families, as well as violence, assault and crime.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we speak about the Fight against Drugs, we refer to the various stakeholders involved in this fight. We thank the Government for allocating funding for the establishment of a Narcotics Bureau within the Ministry of Home Affairs. This will greatly assist in our fight against drugs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Police Force is not alone on this fight. Every law-abiding citizen are addressing these issues to their families and communities. The fight must begin at home. Parents must focus on their parental roles and responsibilities. If parents are God-fearing and firm with the nurturing of their children, there is no way these children would be influenced by peer pressure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, last week, schools around the country celebrated the International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking (IDADAIT) with the theme, *"Be Responsible, Make the Right Choice and Stay Away from Drugs."* Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe, children and youth must constantly be reminded on the issue and its harmful effect on their lives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we often overlooked one important group that has contributed tremendously to keeping our children and youth off the streets. They are involved with the spiritual development of children, youth and our communities, and I am referring to religious bodies.

The Churches and religious bodies must be commended in the work they do in nurturing and leading our children to a meaningful life. Perhaps, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government must look into assisting religious bodies in the form of grants to assist them in their spiritual growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I noted that personal remittances have increased from \$1.4 million in 2022 and \$1.2 million in 2023. To every Fijian working or residing overseas, thank you for your continuous support towards your families and friends back home.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the significance of remittances to the Fijian economy has increased over the years, particularly as it supplements household incomes as well as a major and reliable source for foreign exchange.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we rebound strongly in 2022 and tourism earnings hit a new record of \$2.3 billion in 2023. We commend the amount of work the tourism industry and its stakeholders has done that has led to a 929,000 visitor arrivals last year. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we extend our sincere gratitude to our national airline, hoteliers and other industry players, who have contributed in a way or another to achieving this. This is a positive sign for the economy in terms of increased domestic spending, employment opportunities and increased tax collections.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, finally, I take comfort in Jeremiah 29:11, knowing that it is not a promise to immediately rescue us from hardship or suffering, but rather a promise that God has a plan for our lives and regardless of our current situation, He can work through it to prosper us and give us hope.

MR. SPEAKER.-Honourable Members, before I offer the floor to the next speaker, the Assistant Minister for Education, I would just like to remind honourable Members that we are really up to time here in trying to have 25 speakers speak today. But there is only one, honourable Alvick Maharaj, who still has not made his speech because he is busy with his sick wife. But I have allowed for those who will be speaking tomorrow, if they are ready. You cannot force them because it will be most unfair, but only one has agreed to speak now, and that is honourable Naisa Tuinaceva, who will be speaking after honourable Vanawalu has made his contribution. That is the only change today and I thank you for bearing with us.

HON. I. S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet colleagues, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, and those joining in via livestream and those sitting in the public gallery; *miau sa bula re* and a very good evening to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise before you today to express my wholehearted support for the 2024-2025 Budget. As articulated by the honourable Minister for Education, I stand here as Assistant Minister for Education to reaffirm that this Budget appropriately reflects the vision of our Coalition Government, of ensuring access to quality education for all, as this is crucial for achieving SDG 4. This includes providing education that is inclusive, equitable and relevant to the needs of our learners.

Our Coalition Government and partner organisations have invested in education that will ensure that we progress towards our SDG4. This includes funding teacher training, school infrastructure and education programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will focus on several areas of the Ministry of Education on the 2024-2025 Financial Year. First is equitable access to education. This means that we continue to ensure that our children have access to education.

Currently, we have 656 Rural Service Licence (RSL) providers, and for this year, we have provided them with an increase of \$3.7 million. In working with our stakeholders, we will ensure that during the review of our Transport Policy, we allocate transport assistance to our children in a manner that carefully considers the modes of transport used, the number of children in the locality, location of the school, type of school, the terrain and distance travelled by various students. The Government transport assistance is to assist 89,703 eligible students, and it is to supplement and support our parents to ensure that our children are able to have access to schools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Ministry is committed to promoting lifelong learning and this opportunity should be made available to individuals of all ages to support their personal and professional development.

In the new financial year, we are pleased to inform this august Parliament that the Tertiary Scholarship Loan Scheme Board has agreed to consider the request from the honourable Minister to allow repeaters for MBBS and Pilot Training. The point of differentiation is that Year 13 repeaters will need to have higher marks than the first attempt Year 13 students. Therefore, keeping fairness, the TSLS Board has made a decision for MBBS first attempt Year 13 students to have existing 340 marks as a cut off mark, whereby, the repeaters ought to have 365 and in their first attempt, 250 plus.

For Pilot Training Scholarship, first attempt Year 13 students to have 310 as their cut off marks and the repeaters to have 335 and first attempt with 250 plus. The pass in Fiji Airways assessment is compulsory for Pilot Training scholarships, despite meeting the cut off mark. By having 250 marks in the first attempt for repeaters, we are ensuring that, at least, less risk repeaters are taking up these two most expensive programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Ministry will continue to support teacher training and professional development. Teachers are at the forefront of providing quality education. The allocation of budgets for training opportunities for staff is through –

- Consultations & Conferences - \$90,000;
- Teacher Leadership Training - \$50,000;
- Implementation of NAP - Gender Based Violence against Women and Girls - \$50,000; and
- Special Education Training - \$5,000;

Totalling \$195,000, this means that we can train our staff in areas of needs, including ECE, SIE, TVET and knowledge-based training on contemporary issues within our various schools here in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, additionally, the allocation of \$26.9 million for salary increments for our teachers and non-teaching staff will motivate our people to remain in the workforce, feel valued and appreciated, fundamentally treating them well through their salary that is essential to improving educational outcomes for our children who are future leaders of Fiji tomorrow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to address inequality, the Ministry must continue to work systematically and working as per our priority. We received our National Qualifications Registration in June 2024 from the Higher Education Commission of Fiji. This will ensure that we are providing programmes that are accredited and recognized by our Higher Education Institutions.

Our children will not be learning in isolation, they will instead be well aware of their education journey - from the Certificates in Vocational Schools through to higher education.

The support for our TVET sector is acknowledged and we will continue to work in the coming year to bolster our TVET in our various schools here in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the need to read and enhance reading is well supported by our new budget for the financial year. The Library allocation has increased from \$890,000 to \$1.3 million. We will be able to train more teachers, more librarians, and also strengthen our work with our Fiji Facility Programme on community spaces. That is the community halls used for studying in the evenings, as well as strengthening the libraries, beginning with our remote, rural and maritime schools which we are also working on it within our current budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also working on promoting technology and innovation in education. The allocation of \$500,000 for the purchase of technical equipment for our Secondary Schools is critical to improving access to education and enhancing learning outcomes. By leveraging technology and innovation, progress towards SDG 4 can be accelerated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the allocation of \$1 million for the Centre for iTaukei Studies (CIS) is one of a kind in Fiji. This was gratefully received by the University's Vice-Chancellor. This allocation is a sign of Government's confidence in the work of the CIS which most recently showcased our traditional canoe - the Drua, for its climate change and ecological crisis research in the villages of Viseisei, Lauwaki and Namoli. The next project for the CIS is to sail the Drua to other villages in Fiji to research climate change and ecological crises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to compliment the areas of need where there are no provisions in the new budget, our Ministry stands together as one to seek alternative funding from existing bilateral partners and new partners to fund our major operational and capital expenditures. At this juncture, I acknowledge our Education Partners Group, our donor partners and technical partners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2024 Education Ministry Budget indicates that the Coalition Government values education and our children remain as the priority of our beloved Fiji. Through this Budget we assure you, Sir, this august Parliament and our fellow citizens that we will continue providing quality services so that our children receive the education that they genuinely deserve.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wholeheartedly support the 2024-2025 Budget.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- I rise to give my contribution to the 2024-2025 National Budget Debate. At the outset, I want to congratulate the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning and National Development and Statistics and his entire team on delivering the 2024-2025 National Budget. I have decided to focus on the positives and then explore the shortfalls in this Budget.

The Positives: Mr. Speaker, Sir, first and foremost, I commend the Government for its decision to increase the National Minimum Wage. The move is an economic adjustment and a powerful statement of our commitment to reducing poverty and addressing the deep-seated income inequality plaguing our society.

Secondly, increasing civil servants' pay is a step in the right direction. We are laying the groundwork for a more motivated and innovative Public Service by promoting fairness and equity in income distribution with other comparative employment sectors. This pay rise together with proper key performance indicators in place is expected to significantly improve service delivery.

After decades of waiting, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 368 Vatukoula mine workers will finally receive some form of strike settlement. I understand there is no obligation from the Government to do that but at the end of the day, it is the people and their cries we need to listen to and try to assist.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget also wisely addresses the critical issue of the skills gap. By investing in skills development, we prepare our workforce for the demands of the modern economy, ensuring that our people are quipped to seize new opportunities and drive our nation forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in recognising the sacrifices made by our disciplined forces, the Government has allocated a \$12 million boost to Corrections Officers. This is an intelligent and necessary step especially as we face losing our trained personnel to overseas opportunities.

Additionally, the \$2 million investment in establishing the Narcotics Bureau is a crucial response to our nation's rising drug issues reflecting our commitment to safeguarding the health and security of our communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while celebrating these positive steps, we must also critically examine the Budget shortfalls. One of the most glaring issues is the need for more exploration of revenue opportunities. In its pursuit of meeting Fijians immediate needs, the Government has overlooked potential avenues to bolster its coffers sustainably.

I am stating the obvious here, a high deficit budget, if not addressed can lead to long-term economic instability and limit our ability to invest in future growth. It is a big spending Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the Government relies heavily on increased revenue from VAT and taxes, this approach forces our citizens to dig deep into their pockets, straining their financial wellbeing. This funding model risks alienating our people and fosters an environment of high inflation, introducing new price pressures that burden everyday life.

As prices soar, the cost of living escalates, eroding disposable income and pushing many into financial distress. Rather than alleviating our fiscal challenges, this strategy diverts revenue from essential public services, causing Government debt to continue its relentless ascent. We must recognise the unsustainable nature of this approach. We must seek alternative, more equitable methods of generating revenue - alternative revenue that does not compromise our citizens' economic stability and welfare. The real solution lies in growing the economy and managing our debt.

Mr Speaker, Sir, Fiji is a nation abundant in resources, with immense potential to harness the agricultural sector for exponential growth in exports and revenue generation. Our fertile land and diverse climate positions us uniquely to tap into global markets, promising to bring billions of dollars in revenue. The opportunity for agriculture import substitution is particularly promising. For example, allowing us to reduce reliance on imported fresh and chilled or value-added crop and livestock commodities.

In 2022, we witnessed a commendable 4.9 percent increase in the value of these exports, growing from \$121.3 million in 2021 to \$127.3 million in 2022. However, despite this progress, the import value of fresh or chilled and value-added crop and livestock commodities surged to \$1 billion in 2022. This disparity underscores the urgent need to bolster our agricultural infrastructure, innovate farming practices and incentivise local production. By doing so, we can transform Fiji into a powerhouse of agricultural exports, significantly enhance our economic resilience, and create sustainable livelihoods for our people.

Infrastructure and Transport, the escalating road congestion problem in Fiji demands our urgent attention. A 2018 study by Pacific Wave titled "Fiji Traffic Woes" quoted a comment by a former Governor of Reserve Bank of Fiji who estimated the congestion cost at a staggering \$400 million per year. This immense financial burden arises from wasted fuel due to engine idling, frequent braking and acceleration, increased vehicle wear and tear, and the significant loss of productivity time.

Beyond the economic costs, the relentless traffic takes a severe mental and emotional toll on our drivers, causing undue stress and frustration. Furthermore, the environmental impact is profound with heightened carbon monoxide emissions harming our atmosphere. Addressing this issue is not just about easing a traffic flow, it is also about reclaiming precious time, reducing environmental damage and enhancing the quality of life for every Fijian.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the urgent need for safe and smart roads in Fiji cannot be overstated. We are witnessing an alarming increase in roads needing proper markings, insufficient traffic signs and poorly executed pothole patching that leaves a hazardous, corrugated surface. These conditions are dangerous for motorists and cause significant damage to vehicles, leading to costly repairs and a heightened risk of accidents. The safe and smart roads are the lifeblood of our nation's infrastructure, essential for the smooth flow of commerce, Fijian's safety, and our communities' overall well-being.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the e-Ticketing system, introduced with the promise of modernising our public transportation has instead imposed its severe financial strains on our bus operators. They are now losing around 15 percent to 25 percent of their income. It was implemented for the first time in Fiji nearly a decade ago, but the system was meant to streamline operations and improve efficiency. However, a crucial oversight was the failure to conduct a review two years post-implementation to address initial teething problems. As a result, we find ourselves almost 10 years later still grappling with the same unresolved issues that plagued the system from the start. An urgent review and overhaul of the e-ticketing system is needed to rectify these longstanding issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the escalating road safety crisis in our nation demands immediate and decisive action, while we have a drop in fatality, we are still confronted with dangerous driving behaviours on our roads. Current fines for traffic violations have proven to be insufficient deterrents, failing to curb dangerous driving behaviours that put countless lives at risk everyday. To address this critical issue, we must impose steeper deterrent fines reflecting these offences' gravity and signal our unwavering commitment to road safety.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the need for increased investment in inter-island travel has never been more pressing. As inter-island travel continues to rise, we must prioritise the safety and efficiencies of our ferry services. Ensuring the safety of inter-island ferries is paramount, requiring stringent safety standards, regular maintenance, and thorough inspections to protect people's lives. Moreover, we must establish a reliable timetable that meets the growing demand and supports our islands economic and social integration. Additionally, implementing fair and controlled boat fares is essential to prevent exploitation and ensure equitable growth across our nation.

On Pressing and Social Issues. Mr. Speaker, the rise in homelessness, particularly among our minor population is a dire and heartbreaking issue that demands our immediate attention. How can we sleep comfortably at night, especially during these cold nights, knowing that our children are sleeping under bridges and in Thurston Garden, exposed to the harsh elements and countless dangers? I propose the establishment of a dedicated task force to work closely with parents, families and communities to detect early warning signs and behaviours that might lead children to run away from home and become homeless. Such a proactive approach can prevent many children from ending up on the streets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us not forget our disabled or differently-abled community, a significant part of our nation with a population of around 114,000 across Fiji. It is disheartening to see that the Fiji National Council for Disabled Persons has been allocated a mere \$550,000 which falls short of meeting their needs and supporting their inclusion and empowerment. This inadequate funding is a stark reminder of the neglect and marginalisation faced by our differently-abled citizens. We must commit to significantly increasing investment in programmes and services that enhance the quality of life, ensure accessibility and equal opportunities. By doing so, we affirm our dedication to a just and inclusive society where every Fijian, regardless of ability, can thrive and contribute to our nation's progress.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must dedicate more investment and support to the Police Force Sexual Offence and Child Abuse Unit and the Crime Stoppers Fiji Scholastic Programme. These units have consistently highlighted the urgent need to improve parenting and address children's nurturing at home to mitigate the criminal issues involving youth today, ranging from drug use and teenage pregnancies to crime and homelessness. By increasing our prevention strategies and dedicating more resources to these critical programmes, we can address the root causes of these problems rather than merely reacting to their consequences. Prevention is more effective, humane and cost-efficient in the long run.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, this Budget is just like any other budget is a step towards a better future for all Fijians. It reflects our collective aspirations and acknowledges our people's hardwork and dedication. However, it is also a call to action for us to think creatively and act decisively to address its shortcomings. Doing so can ensure our programmes is not a temporary relief but a lasting foundation for prosperity.

Mr. Speaker, in saying that, I support the Budget. It is yet to be tested, but I am sure the honourable Prime Minister will conduct a mid-term review to ensure its alignment and ability to effectively support its financial goals.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I want to acknowledge your guidance, Sir, wisdom and leadership on how this case regarding the 16 plus 1 of us on this side of Parliament was handled and resolved.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of the sitting today. Tomorrow, we will continue with the rest in the Batting Order, there are about five or six left. If honourable Maharaj decides to make his contribution, we are allowing him to make that contribution and if not, there will be five and at the tail-end the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance will be invited to give his Right of Reply and maybe proceed to the next item which is the Committee of Supply.

Thank you very much for today, thank you for all your contributions. Parliament is now adjourned until 9.30 a.m. tomorrow.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.37 p.m.